

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Volume 28 : Number Four : Winter 2007

Uninvited Celibacy

Single in the Church

The Wisdom of Limits

Friendship with God

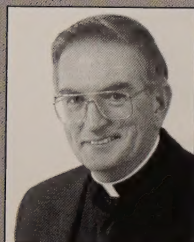
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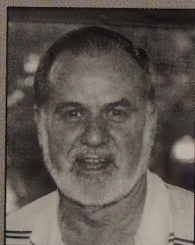
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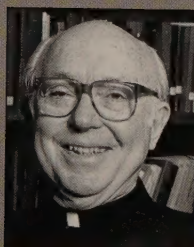
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JAMES J. GILL, S.J., M.D., a priest and psychiatrist, died peacefully on July 29, 2003, after a courageous battle with prostate and bone cancer.

The quarterly magazine *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* (ISSN 0197-3096) is published by Regis University. Subscription rate: United States and Canada, \$36.00; all other countries, \$40.00. Online subscription: \$20.00 for one year. Single copies: United States and Canada, \$10.00 plus shipping; all other countries, \$10.00 plus shipping. Non-profit postage rate paid in Denver, Colorado. Postmaster: Send address changes to *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT*, P.O. Box 3000, Dept. HD, Denville, NJ 07834. Copyright 2007 by *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT*. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

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Manuscripts are received with the understanding that they have not been previously published and are not currently under consideration elsewhere. Feature articles should be limited to 4,500 words (15 double-spaced pages), with no more than 6 recommended readings; filler items of between 500 and 1,000 words will be considered. All accepted material is subject to editing. When quoting the Bible, the New Revised Version of the Bible is preferred.

Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and bibliography. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

Letters are welcome and will be published as space permits and at the discretion of the editors. Such communications should not exceed 600 words and are subject to editing.

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Editor's Page

LIGHT IN A DARK TIME

The Advent and Christmas seasons are upon us, a time of light and hope. For those of us in the northern hemisphere it is the darkest time of the year, with the winter solstice bringing the shortest day. We can use a word of light and hope. I don't know how readers from the southern hemisphere experience this season. However, given the rather bleak situation of many people in both hemispheres, I suspect that the promises of the readings of this liturgical season are needed by all of us.

It might help to remind ourselves that the promises made to the Israelites in the readings from Isaiah and the other prophets used in Advent came at very dark moments in their history, most of them having been made just before, during and after the great calamity of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the exile of many Israelites to Babylon. In other words, they first heard these promises when they were buried in darkness and near despair, and the promises gave them hope and even joy. Moreover, the story of the birth of Jesus, so full of joy on Christmas day, is followed soon after by the reminder of the murder of all the two-year-old baby boys in the Bethlehem area, ordered killed by Herod the Great. The events of Christmas are shadowed always for us Christians by the knowledge that the Crucifixion is only a few years down the road. And the promise of the Resurrection that gave such hope to the early Christians did not spare them from ridicule, persecution and even death. The promises of light and hope and joy always come to us as promises because very often our lives are filled with more darkness and suffering than light and joy. We live by faith not by light.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). These words remind us that our hope is in God and in God's fidelity to the promises made, not in their fulfillment right now. How God will be faithful we cannot know in

advance. One thing any believer who has lived a little knows is that God's fidelity cannot mean that everything will go well for us in life. Faith in God does not guarantee that we will be spared from suffering, loss and death. The central symbol of our religion is the cross, after all; Jesus, the Son of God, was not spared the cruelty of such a death. Belief and trust in God's promises guarantee only that, no matter how dark life becomes, no matter how frustrated we are by our lives, no matter how distant "peace on earth" seems now, ultimately "all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well," as Julian of Norwich put it centuries ago during a very dark period in the history of Europe. Like Jesus when he went to his death on the cross, we, too, are asked to believe that God, who creates this world and each one of us for a purpose, will never be ultimately frustrated. Hence, Julian can say, "All will be well, and all manner of thing will be well." Faith is, indeed, the conviction of things not seen.

These reflections seem *a propos* for this issue since many of the articles address the problem of trust in God in difficult and painful situations. We begin with an article that articulates the pain of people who hope for a partner, but either never find one, never find the right one, or lose the one they find. It addresses the question of "uninvited celibacy." Harriett Haggerty depicts the agony of someone on a retreat who has not chosen the single life. I asked advice as to how HUMAN DEVELOPEMENT might respond to the questions Haggerty poses at the end of her short article. I discovered that Anita Houck of St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN, was doing some research on "singles" and asked her to write an article detailing what she discovered. She has distilled some of the insights gleaned from her interviews in order to help pastoral ministers in their work with this population that now, it seems, approaches half of our adult population. I adapted a chapter of a forthcoming book for this issue. The title

"Any Way to Treat a Friend?" takes off from a remark of St. Teresa of Avila, and the article takes up some of the hard things that happen to God's friends. I hope that it will give some food for thought and prayer for those who face "uninvited celibacy" and other uninvited hardships and for those who minister to them.

Mary Elizabeth Kenel, a member of our Advisory Board, responded to my request with her usual insight and warmth. Her article focuses on the wisdom we can glean from those who face limits, the limits of aging, of suffering, of mortality. With psychological and theological resources she helps us to realize that wisdom consists in coming to grips with the finite, i.e., limited, nature of all human endeavors and lives. Kenel's wise reflections on the limits of death are augmented by the article, "The Vocational Witness of the Dying," by Reena George, a palliative care physician practicing in India. George has learned great wisdom from her patients and calls this witness their vocation. In "Prayer out of Passion" a male member of a religious congregation shares a note he wrote some years ago with the hope that it will help others to find God as he did in the darkness and struggle and joy of dealing with sexuality in all its many dimensions.

As we went to press with this issue Mother Teresa's *Come Be My Light* was published. Our regular poet and essayist, James Torrens, S.J., captures in his inimitable and engaging style the mystery of the inner suffering endured by Mother Teresa over the last fifty years of her life. Talk about how God treats friends! This book details, in excruciating and heartrending detail, the darkness of soul experienced almost from the time she began the Missionaries of Charity. If she was not a friend of God, who in our lifetime has been? Yet, it seems, God abandoned her to darkness of soul after begging her to leave her beloved Sisters of Loreto to start this new venture for the sake of the unwanted poor of Calcutta. If you have questions about the way

God seems to be treating you, you might read this book. The amazing thing is that Mother Teresa, in spite of her own felt loss of God's presence and of her own questions about whether she had lost faith, retains an absolute trust and faith in God. One of her prayers to God which expresses her agony and feeling of being abandoned ends with these words that are stunning in their trust and love:

In spite of all-this darkness & emptiness is not as painful as the longing for God-the contradiction I fear will unbalance me-What are You doing My God to one so small? When You asked to imprint Your Passion on my heart-Is this the answer? If this brings You glory, If You get a drop of joy from this-If souls are brought to You-If my suffering satiates Your Thirst-Here I am Lord, with joy I accept all to the end of life-& I will smile at Your Hidden Face-always.

Moreover, she also indicates that when she was working with the unwanted beggars and poor of Calcutta she felt the presence of Jesus with her in a tender and consoling way.

God's ways are not our ways. Faith in the promises of God often brings us up against the intractable and the unsolvable. Ultimately we face the Mystery we call God, who is light in all our darkness. But the light God brings us is never cheap grace.

In these dark times I wish you all the blessings of the light of Christ.

Bill Barry, S.J.

William A. Barry, S.J.
Editor-in-Chief

Uninvited Celibacy

Harriett Haggerty, M.S.W.



On the second day of a directed retreat, the retreatant suddenly half-rose from her chair, arms spread out in supplication, and yelled: "I DIDN'T SIGN ON FOR THIS, Y' KNOW!"

As her director, I was moved by her outburst. It is why, with her permission, I bring this cross-section of her journey to the spiritual and therapeutic community, and to those who understand how she feels, so that we might consider its implications.

The directee, a 60-something, Catholic woman, divorced, has finally worked up the courage to start processing her years of sexual tension, deprivation, longing, anger, and physical and emotional pain caused by the absence of sexual activity in her marriage, and subsequent divorce. She decided to begin the work on a directed retreat, so that she could devote time to prayer and talking in a healing atmosphere. It was difficult just to start the conversation.

She is but one person in a world of many men and women who are widowed, divorced, separated, in a marriage in which one partner cannot participate sexually, or single, never having found a life-mate. A good number of these people had hoped to have a life in which sexual intimacy would play a part. They wanted a life that would be enriched by the gift of playful, romantic touching, caress-

ing, arousal, orgasm; a healthy, physical, loving relationship. Their sexuality is an integral part of them, a magnificent gift of the Creator.

These folks never chose celibacy. They did not want to be celibate. They believed that their particular lives just might be better expressed with another, in as complete a sharing as possible. They believed that their sexual sharing is healthy, or could be, and is part of their spirituality; yet, this part of them seems to have been lopped-off. They are celibate, and this celibacy was uninvited.

Counselors and directors with whom I've spoken agree that this is not a subject frequently addressed by a client. I have also spoken with individuals who are in this situation, and they confirm that they don't discuss their sexual feelings with anyone.

Why is this? Is it that they feel silly in mentioning it, as if they should be able to "put up with it"? How could that make sense, that this part of them just withers up and disappears? How much energy goes into repressing, sublimating, denying, and hiding sexual feelings, and what are the emotional consequences, costs and benefits of this? Where do the feelings go? Might they consider their sexual hungers to be an impediment to be overcome, like some "bad thing"? Do they sometimes cry themselves to sleep, feeling guilty or shameful for their sexual fantasies? Is it possible that others rationalize, saying that they "never saw what was so great about sex, anyway?" Do others say to themselves, "Get over it—it ain't gonna happen!" when their bodies react during a steamy romantic scene in a movie? Could others seek relationships for the sake of relationship, or find what some might call "not-so-appropriate" ways of expressing their sexuality? Do some dwell on it, and say nothing? Do they hope that their sexual feelings will "just go away"? Why is it acceptable to speak of sex in innuendo, with raucous laughter, prurient humor, but not in honest dialogue about one's sexual feelings? In a society riddled with sex, why cannot people admit, without shame, fear, embarrassment or humiliation, that they want a loving, enthusiastic sexual romp in the proverbial hay?

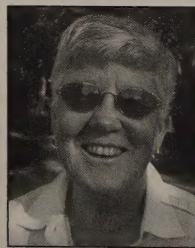
This directee has offered the opportunity for honest dialogue about this topic of uninvited celibacy. She has offered us a statement filled with raw feelings:

anger, pathos, longing, energy, intensity, desire and best of all, passion. She wants help in living her life with her sexual feelings.

What is she seeking, and what is she asking? Some possibilities:

- She does not want to feel so alone. How have others in her situation dealt with their sexual feelings?
- How can she find others with whom she can share her experiences, and perhaps pray together?
- Would a retreat be feasible?
- How can the field of psychology help her?
- How can her spirituality progress with all these feelings?
- How can the helping community bring the topic of uninvited celibacy into the open?
- Can this topic be included in the sexuality curriculum of colleges, seminaries or other training programs?
- What consolation does her church offer her, or the spiritual traditions of others?

The professional helping community has a deep well of experience and knowledge from which to draw. People like this directee have great wealth to share. Together, we can offer help and encouragement in dealing with uninvited celibacy.



Harriett Haggerty, M.S.W., is retired from hospice work, and now works part-time in an assisted living facility, doing group work with residents. She is a trained spiritual director and has a small practice for spiritual direction and for therapy. She co-leads a support group for Straight Spouses.

SINGLE in the Church

Anita M. Houck, Ph.D.



Something important has happened in the last decade: according to the 2005 Census, most American households are now headed by single adults. Of course, the demographics tell only part of the story of singleness in contemporary America. Even excluding those who have made a commitment to vowed celibacy, the identity of this new majority is widely varied, including those who have always been single; those, sometimes called “single again,” who have been married and are widowed or divorced; those who live alone and those who live with roommates, parents, children, or partners, some of them partners of the same sex whom they can’t marry outside the borders of Massachusetts or inside most churches. Moreover, for most single adults, regardless of how they feel about their own lives, being single still seems like a cultural anomaly. To borrow a title from a classic book, single adults still see themselves as living in a married world. The situation is little different inside the church. While the Roman Catholic tradition in particular has valued vowed celibacy, it has had little to say to those who find themselves both unwowed and unmarried. In fact, its commitment to marriage and family can sometimes be expressed in ways that leave single adults feeling excluded.

During the past year, I’ve had the opportunity to interview single adults and pastoral leaders who work with them. This article is

“While we can’t give a fully satisfying response to the position ‘I would like to get married,’ we might be able to help single adults identify and satisfy some of the underlying needs that loving marriages fulfill.”

an attempt, and a preliminary one at that, to record and reflect on what I’ve heard. I confess from the start that those I’ve spoken to are by no means representative of the single population at large. Most of the approximately ninety single individuals I’ve interviewed so far are members of three Christian congregations in the Chicago area, two large and Roman Catholic (one urban, one suburban) and one small, urban, and Protestant. Almost all the interviewees identify themselves as white or Caucasian; professional; and, in the Roman Catholic congregations, heterosexual or straight. (This was not true at the Protestant congregation, which is openly welcoming to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered [GLBT] people.) Finally, because my research suggested that involvement in smaller church communities may affect how single adults perceive their congregations, I interviewed a large number of Roman Catholics who had participated in life-cycle groups (e.g., for young adults), support groups (e.g., for those experiencing divorce or grief), or a retreat program that one congregation developed to foster community. The sample did vary in age (from early 20s to 70s), in level of participation in the church, and in marital history.

In the course of these interviews, I’ve confronted what seem to me two temptations that come with characterizing single life. One is the temptation to overemphasize the brokenness and isolation of single adults in society and the church, stressing their needs; the other is to overemphasize single life’s freedoms and vocational dignity, stressing single adults’ gifts. As single adults and pastoral leaders have consistently reminded me, each perspective holds a piece of the truth, and neither holds more than that. On the one hand, most

single adults speak of seeking and finding happiness in being single; on the other hand, most would welcome marriage. They don’t want pity, but many would appreciate a recognition of the struggles, social and theological, that can come with unwanted singleness. As Philip Tovey has put it, many experience singleness as “an unwanted gift.”

As pastoral leaders ask how the church can nurture single adults in both their giftedness and their needs, we might do well to start with the obvious: no church, no institution, can fulfill a single adult’s desire for a loving marriage. Once we acknowledge that—once we confess what we can’t do—we might better be able to help single adults meet some of the needs that all adults have regardless of their marital status. A helpful framework for thinking about these needs might be found in a surprisingly non-pastoral source: Roger Fisher and William Ury’s now-classic bestseller *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Fisher and Ury found that people could best address their needs and desires when they got beneath stated “positions” to articulate their “underlying concerns.” If we take the time to clarify our underlying concerns, we might see that there are several ways to address them, that there are valid alternatives to our position. To apply this framework to single life, we might say that, while we can’t give a fully satisfying response to the position “I would like to be married,” we might be able to help single adults identify and satisfy some of the underlying needs that loving marriages fulfill, among them intimate friendship, spiritual encouragement and challenge, acknowledgment of a person’s uniqueness and giftedness, the affirmation that one is loved, the affirmation that one is a sexual being and a sense of being accepted as an adult in society. Helping single adults meet these needs, I would contend, is a worthy goal of Christian pastoral efforts. Moreover, if we try to help singles meet those needs, we might find that we also end up doing a better job of meeting the needs of all the church.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WELCOME

Almost every interview included stories of welcome offered and welcome denied. Interviewees spoke of feeling unimportant when they ventured into a church and were not acknowledged, and they gratefully remembered gestures that included them in the worshipping community: a smile and greeting from an

usher, words of welcome at the beginning of a church service, the invitation to greet others and exchange names at the start of worship (a practice that, some gamely acknowledged, is also likely to set some worshippers' teeth on edge). Such practices serve the entire assembly, but they may be especially important for those who come to church alone and those who have experienced estrangement from the church, perhaps because of divorce or sexual orientation.

One reason welcoming gestures seem to be important to single adults is that these practices help to de-emphasize the distinction between married families and single adults. In the eyes of many single adults, families walk through the door of the church already connected to and accepted by others near them. Meanwhile, single adults often feel isolated and even embarrassed as they sit alone. Pastoral practices can either exacerbate or reduce those feelings. In one parish, several members mentioned the pain they felt when the pastor invited those in the assembly to turn to the people they came to Mass with (sometimes explicitly mentioning spouses) and express their love for them. While the single adults who mentioned this practice acknowledged that it sprang from an admirable desire to support families, they also said that it underlined the awkwardness and aloneness they already felt. Similarly, always building homilies on stories of family life, or inviting worshipers to participate in rituals as families—for instance, asking only families to bring gifts forward, or encouraging members of families to wash each other's feet at a Holy Thursday service—can exclude single adults both symbolically and practically. I've yet to meet a single adult who begrudges families the attention they receive in the church, but I've met many who wish that the energies and sensitivity rightly put toward serving families could be extended to single adults as well.

Welcoming gestures make a community's theology, and in particular its theological images, powerfully practical. If the church can truly see itself not only as a group of families but as a family in itself—the family of God, the body of Christ, a community in which there is no Jew or Greek or male or female—it will find creative ways to integrate single and married, adults and children. By asking all its members to reach beyond the walls of the domestic church, it will invite them to embrace their identity as part of a universal church. So, for instance, Vanessa (her name, like that of others in this article, has been changed), a recently

married Protestant woman in her forties, suggested that families and couples not always sit together at services. Not only would this practice encourage members to share worship with different people, but it would expose married people to the experience that most single adults have week after week.

Welcoming practices need to be an organic part of the church's commitment. Asking visitors to stand and be acknowledged has little value if congregants do not later extend a personal welcome. Moreover, welcome can't be limited to certain groups. Single adults frequently reflected on their own experience of church in light of the experience of others whom they perceived as similarly marginalized or excluded. I never asked people to comment on the state of the Catholic Church in general, but when I asked interviewees how churches could become better places for single adults, they frequently brought up aspects of the Catholic Church that troubled them, most often the role of women, the need for more transparency in light of the sexual-abuse crisis, and the importance of inclusivity especially to GLBT Catholics. At the same time, a congregation's efforts did not need to be directed specifically to single adults in order positively to affect singles' view of their church. In one congregation, many spoke appreciatively of their church's ministry to Jewish-Catholic couples, a ministry that did not directly serve single adults but that communicated the message that their congregation was inclusive, attentive, and welcoming.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY

Single adults vary widely in the extent to which they seek community in their congregations. Ed, an always-single man in his seventies, expected nothing from the church other than proximity and providing the sacraments. Similarly, Maddie, a highly successful forty-year-old professional who has always been single, chose to put her time into friends, family, and career, and so never attended church events other than Mass. Still, she was glad her church offered programming for people in her age and marital demographic, grateful that she could take advantage of it if her priorities or schedule changed.

Others hope to find community in their congregations but have been frustrated in the search. Even at a successfully welcoming congregation, some members noted, "If you go alone, you'll leave alone." Single adults often say that they realize that it is up to them to

seek out ways to become involved; just coming to worship services will not suffice. Susan, a retired Catholic widow of 67, regularly attended the singles ministry run by an evangelical church. While she “didn’t appreciate” the theology, she found there what she did not find in her own congregation: well-organized, well-attended, well-priced programs that allowed her to meet other single adults her own age. Her experiences led her to recommend an approach for those seeking to become involved in any church activity: have a thick skin and a sense of humor, and always make yourself go five times.

Even when congregations do offer ministries that attempt to meet the needs of single adults at different stages in the life cycle, coming alone can be daunting and becoming involved can be difficult. One group for single adults in their forties and up began to assign some of its members to welcome visitors; to talk to those who were alone; and to make phone calls inviting members to events, with women calling men and men calling women. Rosalind, a divorced single mother of a grown son, testified to their success:

I can’t say enough about what they did for me. It took such a humanistic approach. “We know this is hard for you to come.” I mean [another member of the group] was, “Oh my God, Rosalind, you’re in the right place. Yeah, you’re scared, but we’re so happy, here, sit down next to me.” She said, “I gotta tell you what we’re doing Tuesday, Thursday . . .” But it was a very intensely personal experience.

Besides active efforts at welcoming, three other factors often seemed to help single adults find a sense of community in the church: opportunities to gather in smaller groups with people of their own age or similar interests; cooperation with other churches to create groups with a regional, and not just a congregational, membership; and challenging, deeply spiritual shared experiences. One successful ministry with all three aspects is Beloved, the Kairos-like retreat at Old St. Patrick’s Church in Chicago. The retreat, which was consciously designed to build connections between members of the large congregation, draws an intergenerational group of people, many of whom are not members of the church, and a large number of single and single-again participants. With ongoing invitations, it encourages retreatants to stay connected by serving at future

retreats, attending Beloved formation events, and forming spirituality groups. As the retreat’s director, Terry Nelson-Johnson, explained, the retreat invites participants to interact on a level of intimacy that many single adults find only rarely. Such intimacy, Nelson-Johnson argues, is “not a luxury. You must have intimacy, and we sort of assume intimacy means significant other. It doesn’t. It means significant others; means to have a context in which you can be significant; and everybody was a potential significant other for Jesus because he knew how to do intimacy.”

If we reflect on single adults’ varied needs for community and churches’ varied responses, we come upon a paradox: single adults do not want to be isolated by their churches’ neglect, but they also do not want to be isolated by their churches’ excessive concern. The tension between paying too much attention and not paying enough can never be resolved; single adults simply vary too much in what they expect of their churches. Asked how churches could be good places for single adults, Hannah, a middle-aged Protestant woman who has always been single, answered, “Treat us like everybody else.” When Delores became a young single mother, the last thing she wanted was to be “isolated” with others who had experienced divorce; what she did want, she said, was good liturgy, because what sustained her in her divorce was the experience of worshiping with the community. Similarly, Ellen, a thirty-nine year-old Catholic divorcee, warned that churches that “plan for” single adults may intend to engage them, but instead often set them apart. Alexandra, an always-single Hispanic woman of 34, resisted being seen as “part of this leper colony” of single adults and suspected that gay and lesbian worshipers might have the same concerns. Richard, a gay single father of two adopted sons, did voice that concern, particularly regarding the isolating power of labels. While he deeply valued his congregation’s inclusive theology, he was wary of the “reverse closet” that could pigeonhole him with a complacent, “Oh, he’s one of our gays.”

Two concrete suggestions emerge from these discussions of community. First, the old adage may be true: it may indeed be impossible to measure the success of a ministry merely by the numbers who attend. Even when they don’t take advantage of them, single adults appreciate the ministries their churches offer, particularly churches’ efforts to welcome and include all. Second, language can have a significant effect on whether ministries appeal to or alienate single adults.

After her divorce, Becky was active in her church's family support group. Then the congregation renamed the group to include the word "couples"—a simple move that immediately excluded her and her son. On the other hand, single people in one successful church often referred to church as "home" or "family." Such metaphors, if they fit a congregation's theology and practice, can well express the congregation's commitment to include all members in the church's work and welcome. But if the church does not truly extend its familial embrace to all, these images merely reinforce social stereotypes that value married family life over singleness. When churches attempt to extend imagery of family or home to single adults, especially those living alone—for instance, when the U. S. Bishops' suggestions for the Jubilee Day for Singles encourage single adults to "be a domestic church" (<https://www.usccb.org/laity/singles.shtml>)—it's important not only that the language be sensitive to all, but that the claims it makes fit the church's practices.

CELEBRATING SINGLEHOOD

During the course of my interviews, no example from popular culture was mentioned as often as a particular television episode of *Sex and the City*—the episode in which the protagonist, tallying up everything she has bought for engagement parties, weddings, and baby showers, decides to throw a party to celebrate, and amply equip, her single life. Single adults usually appreciate being included in the rituals that mark the family lives of their friends and kin; many even draw a strong sense of connection from being part of them. But they often face them, if not with *Sex-and-the-City*-quality resentment, at least with wistfulness.

Given this mixed attitude, I was fascinated when some single adults suggested that church communities consider celebrating the transitions that mark single life just as they do for family life. To be sure, when I asked single adults in subsequent interviews about this proposal, most responses were conspicuously mixed, beginning with surprise, moving to assent that it was an excellent idea, and then arriving at low-level exasperation: sounds great in theory, but what would you do in practice? For most singles, for instance, the obvious parallel to a wedding anniversary—something like a "Congratulations on forty years of being single!" party—has no appeal other than its dark humor. As Tiffany, a Pentecostal black professional woman in her

"Congregations can also re-conceive traditions so that they extend to single adults, as when blessings for Father's and Mother's Day recognize aunts and uncles, godparents, step-parents, and other mentors."

early thirties, put it, "The life transitions of a single person don't fit a Hallmark script."

Despite their mixed reactions, however, many single adults concluded that the idea of marking events in single life is worth thinking about, and they proposed several possibilities. Small, close groups of friends might celebrate a person's distinctive ways of living out her singlehood or offer rituals of healing at the end of an important relationship. Less intimate groups, such as church-based small faith communities, could offer blessings for birthdays and transitions into new jobs or new homes, events shared with married couples but sometimes especially significant for a single person. Finally, larger groups, such as congregations as a whole, could offer liturgies specifically for those who are single or those who are grieving a significant relationship. Congregations can also re-conceive traditions so that they extend to single adults, as when blessings for Father's and Mother's Day recognize aunts and uncles, godparents, stepparents, and other mentors. Rachel, an always-single Catholic young adult, mentioned her congregation's tradition of offering a Valentine's Day Mass for married and engaged couples, and said that she'd welcome the chance to attend as a single person who also wants to celebrate romantic love. Brendan, who is 42 and always single, enthusiastically proposed that churches go beyond merely including single adults and periodically hold a "Celebrate Singlehood" day to recognize the contributions of single adults and the validity of the single lifestyle. All of these practices announce to the community that single life, and those who live it, are valued. But they can do more than that. To quote Terri, a Catholic who was divorced and is now in a long-term committed relationship with another woman, such rituals communicate that "everything that we do is connected to God, and we can tend to become disconnected."

The idea of ritually celebrating single life deserves both consideration and caution. Not every single adult

“Single adults often mentioned catechetical formation as among the top needs they looked to the church to fulfill.”

would find a Valentine’s Day Mass appealing; after all, some do not even come to church on Christmas and Easter because being surrounded by so many families is too painful. Similarly, many would feel more embarrassed than embraced when the “Celebrate Singlehood” t-shirts were handed out. A vocal minority of those to whom I spoke resisted the idea of having the church honor any transitions in single life; as Ellen put it, “For crying out loud, it’s your church, what more do you want?” But Ellen had no doubt that if the pastor of her church were asked to bless a new home, he’d come. Where communities have not developed practices for recognizing single adults, or where the context suggests that single adults might not welcome such attention, individual pastoral ministers might well find appropriate ways to affirm single life through ritual gestures. Jesus may not always have danced when others piped, but there are surely occasions when piping will allow someone to dance.

FORMATION FOR SINGLE ADULTS

Single adults often mentioned catechetical formation as among the top needs they looked to the church to fulfill. Many say they would welcome formation on the spirituality of singleness, not only as a source of guidance for their daily life but also as a sign that single life is valued and its challenges are recognized, and as a chance to gather single adults around a topic of mutual interest. This last factor is an important one, because, as sincere as single adults are in asking for catechesis, those who work in young adult ministries have long known that successful programming gives participants at least two reasons to attend any event. Combining spiritual formation with social events is a practical strategy to be sure: it is always helpful to allow people to say they’re here for the speaker, faith-shar-

ing, or softball game, not for the chance to find a date or a mate. But it is also an approach that sends a profound message about integration, showing that the church values the whole person, spiritual, mental, social, and physical. There is ample anecdotal evidence that programs on relationships are among the most popular for young adults and single adults at all ages, so it might make sense to introduce spiritual resources through that topic, broadly understood: just as sound teaching on sexuality is about more than genital sex, so sound catechesis about relationships attends to more than romantic partnerships. As Rosalind put it, “The church environment, I think, is the place where we say, ‘Am I really in relationship with Christ? Am I really in relationship with other ...people doing my ministry? Am I really in relationship with a new partner?’ ...I think we forget to ask this. And quite frankly, I don’t think we know the answers”

Though relationships are about more than romance, sexuality is an important component of formation for single life, and in my interviews that topic presented a catechetical quandary. The single adults I spoke to almost unanimously reported that their churches say nothing about sexuality, and they almost unanimously saw this silence as a regrettable lack. Still, they were not sure what the church could offer that single adults would welcome. After all, most believe that the church’s teaching on single sexuality is a simple, intransigent “Don’t!,” a message they find unrealistic. So long as the church insists on abstinence before marriage, many single adults doubt it can offer anything helpful to their relationships. Still, some single adults turn to their churches for just such guidance, with mixed hopes and mixed success. Some single-again adults expressed particular interest in guidance as they considered re-entering the world of dating, a world that, many remarked, has changed substantially since they met and married their spouses. For instance, Susan was grateful that her congregation’s group for older adults brought in a nurse to speak about sexually transmitted diseases. On the other hand, Tabitha, a young adult committed to church teachings on abstinence, said she has been frustrated by the lack of support she and her boyfriend have received when they consulted pastoral leaders for advice about keeping their relationship chaste.

The climate for discussing sexuality may be discouraging, but there are reasons for hope. First, some single adults say they would welcome genuinely open

discussion of issues in the church, including but not limited to sexuality; they appreciate occasions when knowledgeable speakers are willing to engage their questions. Second, single adults who have heard speakers discuss sexuality in positive, holistic ways often feel more comfortable and less combative about church teachings on sexuality. Dan, a 55-year-old electrician and divorced father of grown children, spoke with feeling about the Beloved retreat, in particular about a speaker's affirming attitude toward sexuality: "I felt like a sexual person, not a Roman Catholic celibate with no zest for life." In another parish, the vibrant young adult group has addressed issues of sexuality in its evening events, which combine a talk, discussion, and time for socializing. When I asked two members of the group—both always-single men—about church teachings on sexuality, they offered remarkably thoughtful, conscience-based responses, responses that were strikingly similar to the ones I heard when I talked to their deeply respected pastor and to a moral theologian who had spoken to the group. While their views might strike some as an inadequate expression of magisterial teaching, they bespoke a thoughtful engagement with Christian tradition and a high valuing of human relationships and human sexuality. Their responses belie the view that the church has nothing to offer single adults in the realm of sexuality. A number of current books address the subject as well, from different perspectives and with varying degrees of success, among them Donna Freitas and Jason King's chatty, postmodern *Save the Date*; John R. Weiss's *Couples in Love*, infused with the theology of Opus Dei; and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead's admirably thoughtful *Wisdom of the Body*.

Pastoral ministers might do much good by offering a fuller picture of Christian sexuality than most single adults have experienced, one that includes a coherent presentation of church teachings, sympathetic support for those struggling with chastity, a welcome to all without denying the church's teachings, and thoughtful formation on the topic of individual conscience. I still remember hearing from my college chaplain that the Catholic Church expected me—trusted me—to form, and then to follow, my own conscience. Not all my college hallmates understood the weight of this teaching (one immediately reduced it to "Does that mean I can have sex now?"), but for me it was a message at once humbling and elating, a message that invited me into a deeper knowledge of Church teachings. Perhaps it

could have a similar significance for others.

Two other catechetical needs are worth noting. First, while single adults do not come to church only to find partners, many seek formation that will prepare them for marriage. Several single adults noted that they were liable to idealize marriage, and the temptation to do so was sometimes mentioned as a good reason for ministries to bring married and single adults together. One young man remarked on a bulletin ad that invited married men to a program on being a good husband; he wondered why he—as someone who aspired to be a good husband some day—could not be invited as well.

The second need was not often voiced, but was clearly crucial for Roman Catholics: accurate education about divorce and annulments. Sarah, a middle-aged woman, gratefully recounted that her pastor, when he heard about her divorce, immediately encouraged her, "Don't let this keep you from Communion." She had no idea that his invitation was an expression, not a violation, of magisterial teaching. Similarly, Dan spoke of being so moved in his new congregation that he received Eucharist even though he was divorced. Annulment, too, is widely misunderstood and widely resented. Ellen characterized the process (which she began but never finished) as "writing a check for \$2,000, directly to the Cardinal;" Dan said that he had to wrestle with the faith questions raised by annulment, which he described as "paying to say he'd made a mistake;" others saw annulment as a "money-maker" for the church. Indeed, complaints about expenses stood out as the central connection most Catholics make to annulments. Considering how often divorced adults feel stigmatized, it seems the Church as a whole is in need of compassionate, clear, adult-level discussion of the Church's views on divorce, remarriage, and annulment.

MENTORS AND ROLE MODELS

Carrie's parents divorced when she was young, and she misses having role models for lasting marriage. At 34, previously engaged, she looks to her future, whether single or married, and asks, "Who can help us chart our way?" Similarly, Tiffany's Pentecostal church offers her no well-educated, professional single women role models; and Veronica, a professional woman in her thirties, looks in vain for single saints in her Catholic tradition.

When single adults find role models, they value them. At a Protestant church, the recent calling of a

single female pastor has been of great significance to a number of single women in the congregation; similarly, at a large Catholic church, some interviewees noted that the staff included a single parent and appreciated that someone on staff had come out as of same-sex orientation. Missy, a young adult reflecting on her experience at the Beloved retreat, said that she found new hope for what her life could be when she heard the eloquent, faith-filled testimony of a successful middle-aged woman who, like Missy, had always been single. For Terri, the support of a friend who is a priest was crucial to her throughout her divorce and subsequent discernment of her sexual orientation. Facing divorce, she said, "You have to battle somebody, a huge entity that you've respected all your life....Churches make you feel like...you're not accepted in the Catholic Church. A pastor like [my friend] can make you feel accepted, but again, you have to have a mature faith; you need a mature faith and you need a mentor or a pastor or a priest you know."

SINGLE LIFE AS A VOCATION

Kathleen Hughes, in her wonderful *Saying Amen: A Mystagogy of the Sacraments*, reflects on the traditional Catholic notion of four vocational life states: marriage, single life, religious life, and ordination to priesthood. For Hughes, each reflects an aspect of Jesus' life and mission, and "all represent ways of holiness, ways of discipleship, ways of dying and rising." Those who marry "become most fully human and holy by following Jesus in totally self-giving love to another in marriage;" those in religious life "throw in our lot with others of like vision in order to follow Jesus, poor, chaste and obedient in a community of life and mission;" and those who are ordained follow Jesus into his "ministry . . . of word, unity and charity." Those "drawn to the single life" model their lives in particular on "the solitary Jesus, rootless and restless about the reign of God, going about freely doing good" (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999, 104). In grounding each state of life in the model of Jesus, Hughes affirms the universality of the Christian call to become holy, to serve as a disciple, to die and rise.

There is much in the notion of vocation that may be helpful for thinking about single life. In particular, the single adults to whom I spoke agreed that there is such a thing as a valid call to single life, even though none had discerned such a call themselves and all

expected that such vocations are quite rare. Applied to those who do not feel called to single life, however, the concept of vocation presents problems as well as promise. The first difficulty arises from the limits imposed by the model of four states of life, a model that does not give us much room to consider the distinct ways vocations are lived. Given the diversity of experiences within single life, for instance, we probably can not and should not expect all single people to embody what Hughes calls "rootlessness and restlessness," at least not beyond the restlessness that Augustine prophesied for all of us before we rest in God. Living a single life, in other words, does not mean being personally called to rootlessness any more than being married means being called to live in the suburbs.

Besides the limits of this traditional model, another difficulty in speaking of single life as a vocation lies in the varied, and often very limited, understandings of the word itself. For many, "vocation" refers to a job and one's training for a job; for some, it refers only to priesthood and vowed religious life; for others, the word is so archaic that it has become, to quote one pastoral minister, "silly." Even those who think about vocation as a broader spiritual reality may see it as something almost magical, a single route through life that God has secretly mapped out for each person. Megan, a twenty-year-old senior at a Catholic college, told of a conversation in which she and a friend discussed this view of vocation, seeing it as something already fixed but dangling just out of reach. The one doing the dangling, of course, is God, and the whole image left the impression that God is just being "rude."

In addition to the confusion around the term and the constraining spiritualities that are sometimes attached to it, another difficulty arises for many single adults. Many see assent, a conscious "yes" to a discerned call, as an essential component of vocation, and most single adults neither feel called to, nor want to commit to, a lifetime of being single. For Jenny, a 43-year-old always-single graduate student, thinking of singleness as a vocation in this sense sounds destructive: "I don't think God is that cruel that he would say, okay, you didn't want to be a nun, nobody asked you to get married, so I'm going to give you the vocation of being single for the rest of your life"—a vocation her friend Lisa calls "a consolation prize." In this sense, to quote a priest who often works with young adults, calling singleness a vocation can merely "sugar-coat" the experience of single adults.

However, many single adults want to embrace the term. One reason is that doing so gives their lives the respect usually given to marriage, priesthood, and vowed religious life. Glenn, a gay Protestant single father, believes that if singleness is not a vocation, his life is somehow deficient, a merely “default” state:

I wouldn't say it's like a chosen vocation, but I also have a lot of, a fair bit of resistance toward thinking, wanting to think that this is default. ... why should there be something wrong with me because I'm single? Or why should I be anything less than whole or less than complete because I'm single? ...Being in the here and now, being present, this is where I am and this is completely acceptable, you know; I don't have to think there's something wrong with it.

For others, the notion of vocation is more positive, not merely a stamp of acceptability but an intersection with the divine. For Toinette, who is raising her son as a single mother after her divorce, “it makes me think of my life in clarity that if God has this for me at the time, there's something in my life right now, even if I desire to have a spouse, there's something he wants to accomplish in my life that if I had a spouse, I wouldn't be able to accomplish.” Rosalind explicitly ties vocation—whether chosen or not—to the responsibility to use her gifts:

I wish somebody had said to me, “Your chapter on marriage is over. You are now called to a different lifestyle. You don't get to cocoon yourself at home and feel badly that you're not married. God is gonna use you in a different way now.” If you choose not to answer that call—I don't wanna be too saccharine-y about this—then you are the servant in the parable about the gifts. You buried yours. What did the master say at the end? “You're burying them.” He didn't say, “Well geez, I'm sorry you got divorced.” He said, “What have you done for me lately?” You know?

Two changes in perspective might help us negotiate the widely varying responses single adults give to the question of singleness as vocation. First, we might ask whether a vocation can be temporary. Many single adults speak of being called to singleness for a season, as Rachel does:

“Not all single adults are well characterized as unwilling celibates; like marriages, single lives usually include seasons of richness and dryness, of longing and satisfaction.”

I think that the concept that you're called to different things at different points in your life is really, really helpful. ...I think at certain points in your life ... you feel as though you are called to do something that may limit you in meeting people ...or even that you could see a romantic relationship would not be a good thing now, because it would be too emotionally distracting. ...You can kind of discern calls as they come and go, and I think it's a really, really useful sense of thingsit's such a relief because it doesn't mean that I've given up on marriage. ...That should be okay for people and people should be able to think that that actually could be God's will. That it's not like I'm diverging a little and I'll get back like on God's path when I'm dating again. I've just thought it's really, not just useful, but it really resonates for me as a way that life could be.

Similarly, for Vince, a Catholic divorced man of 48, singleness is a vocation that can “evolve ...in a positive way” into the vocation of marriage or religious celibacy. These changing experiences of singleness, like the changes in the lives of married couples, suggest that singleness and marriage are not clear categories on either side of a wedding ceremony. Instead, they exist on a continuum of experiences and desires, with those who have discerned a call to permanent singleness at one end, and those in deeply sacramental marriages at the other. In between are most of the rest of us, whether temporarily embracing our singleness, seeking a loving relationship, dating, or perhaps—on the other side of the wedding ceremony—living in a marriage that feels lonelier than many single lives. Not all single adults are well characterized as unwilling celibates; like marriages,

single lives usually include seasons of richness and dryness, of longing and satisfaction.

Second, we do well to reflect on the way we connect vocation and lifestyle. Whitehead and Whitehead, in *Wisdom of the Body: Making Sense of Our Sexuality*, very helpfully talk of lifestyles not as vocations, but as the settings for vocations, the contexts in which, in various ways, we live out our unique callings from God. One married pastoral minister expressed a similarly balanced view, alternating between his suspicion of and his appreciation for the notion of singleness as a vocation:

Singleness isn't necessarily a vocation. And I think it could be thought as sort of cute: "well, let's give these guys the idea that they have a vocation, too, because everyone else has one." ...So can someone's singleness be central to their expression of vocation in the world? Yes. But is being single a vocation? No, but I guess you say the same thing about marriage ...well, in priests, too, [we might say] "well, he has a vocation but I haven't seen him exercise it recently."

Overall, it seems that most single adults find not a vocation *to* single life, but varied vocations *in* single life. In other words, single adults seek to use their gifts in the place where they find themselves—"in the here and now," as Glenn put it—and that may mean that they serve in ways they could not if married. Joanna, a fifty-three year old woman, always single, puts it well: "The vocation comes not by the identity of yourself as single, but what you do with it." In this sense, to take singleness as a vocation is in fact a matter of choice, the choice to embrace "being in the here and now." After all, God can never meet us anywhere else.

As we listen to single adults reflecting on the notion of vocation, we might return to the question we started with, the question of needs and gifts. Perhaps we can see the two as deeply connected, and see wisdom in that connection. So Jenny, when asked what gifts single adults can offer the church, saw their needs themselves as a gift, and saw both contributing to the good of the whole church: "I think the gift that single people bring is the recognition that there is pain in the world, that there is longing, and that we as a community need to recognize that everybody is not in a struc-

tured relationship that provides for needs to be met. ...We can be a community that reaches out to all, and supports all, and encourages all, and corrects when correction needs to be made." Listening to single adults' reflections can remind us of the deeply human need to contribute to a community that welcomes, nurtures, and appreciates our varied gifts. Here, as so often, attending to the needs of single adults can help pastoral leaders serve the church as a whole. By listening to single adults, the church will find that it is simultaneously incorporating its single members into the community more fully, supporting its families more effectively, and living out its own ecclesiology more authentically.

I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the support of the Project Team for Congregational Studies and the Louisville Institute, each of which provided grant funding that made this research possible. I also thank the members of the Project Team for their gracious guidance throughout the early stages of the project, and the staffs and members of the congregations that so kindly provided logistical support for my research and shared their insights.

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Is This Any Way to Treat Your Friends?

William A. Barry, S.J.



Once St. Teresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic, was thrown from her carriage into some mud. She is supposed to have said to God, "If this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few." The story, if true, shows that Teresa had a close relationship with God. She could speak easily and angrily to God, whether with a sense of humor, or else with the kind of petulance and self-centeredness many of us have at times.

But Teresa's story can also give us pause. In articles and in a forthcoming book, *God Wants Your Friendship*, I maintain that God creates all human beings for friendship. If that is the case, one could ask: how come so many bad things happen to God's friends? I don't mean minor mishaps, such as what happened to Teresa of Avila, but awful things like the rape of children or terror bombing of a subway. Why doesn't God intervene to stop people from committing such horrors? That is one question, and probably the easiest one to answer since human beings with free will perpetrate these horrors. Another is more difficult: how could God allow the natural disasters that devastate so many lives, disasters like still-born babies, tsunamis like the one off the coast of Indonesia in December 2004, and hurricanes like Katrina in the summer of 2005 that

destroyed the city of New Orleans? In addition, people suffer horrendous losses, such as the death at an early age of a spouse or a child. Debilitating illnesses often strike people out of the blue. And some people never find a mate in spite of strong desires, an issue discussed in two articles on unwanted celibacy in this issue. The people who suffer in these and other ways might well ask what good God's friendship is if it does not lead to saving them from such calamities. Can we say anything truthful and helpful to these questions?

GOD'S FRIENDSHIP AND HUMAN PERVERSITY

In some ways a response to the first question, the problem of human evil, seems to be given by the vulnerable way God creates the world. God cannot coerce human beings to live as images of God. That's the price God pays for creating us at all. We have freedom and can refuse to live up to our own best ideals and God's own hopes. It is our refusal to pay attention to the God-inspired movements of our hearts that allows us humans to do such evil things to others.

All of us, if we are honest, know that we have done or said hurtful things to others even though we had some qualms about these actions before we did them. So we know what it means not to pay attention to God's presence. We can only thank God that we were not faced with the kind of powerful impulses child rapists must have, for we do not know whether we would have paid attention to God's presence, a presence we believe is always with us, whether we pay attention to it or not. We can blame the Nazis for the Shoah, but I have to admit that I feel blessed that I was not tested as many Germans were by the propaganda of their government and by fear of the consequences of paying attention to the voice of the Holy Spirit, God's Presence in our hearts. "There, but for the grace of God, go I," is a frequent prayer when I read the newspaper or listen to the news. We are all capable of sin.

God's dream of a world where "they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" (Isaiah 11: 9) cannot come about without the cooperation of all of us, and all of us fall short of God's hopes and expectations. In creating free human beings God becomes vulnerable to our weaknesses and fears. God cannot coerce our cooperation.

But why doesn't God wipe out the evildoers? Jesus' answer to this question came in the parable of the weeds among the wheat.

He put before them another parable:

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn'" (Matthew 13: 24-30).

I don't know about you, but this parable evokes a sigh of relief because I have often enough been a weed among the wheat.

It is also true, from what we know about the interweaving of everything in the universe, that the annihilation of anything could mean the annihilation of everything. Again, a sigh of relief that God has not given up on our world in spite of the weeds all of us have been and have sown. What are your own reactions?

DISASTERS AND UNEXPECTED AND UNWANTED EVENTS

The second question is the more vexing one, namely why God creates a world where natural disasters cause such havoc for so many people and where so often natural desires seem thwarted. One question has bedeviled humankind perhaps since the dawning of consciousness. If God is all good and all-powerful, why is the world a place where natural disasters occur with such regularity? I don't know the answer, since I have not been satisfied with any of the answers I have heard over the years. Perhaps the only answer that is satisfying is the one each one of us receives from God when we cry out and lament over such disasters. Perhaps then we can understand how Job was satisfied when God finally spoke to him after all his complaints. In the book of Job God speaks to Job in chapters 38 to 41. Basically, through a series of ironic and angry-sounding questions, God tells Job that he, Job, is not God,

and that only God can know the ultimate mystery of all things. At the end of these questions Job answers:

I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted....
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know....
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42: 1-6).

God's response does not explain the misfortunes that befell Job, and the questions God puts to Job are not an answer to life's catastrophes. They just point to the mystery of God and of the universe God has created. Job's response can seem to be abject and self-abusive. But we can also read his reply more generously as a statement of fact when one has encountered God. When we encounter God, we know that we are not God and that we exist only because God wants us to exist. In that sense, I can "despise myself" for not having realized what the true state of things is.

Was Job wrong to keep wanting a response from God? God's questions seem to show anger that Job dared to make his complaints and demand a hearing before God. Yet, immediately after the words of Job quoted above, God speaks to Eliphaz, one of the friends who had tried to defend God's ways and shut Job up: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42: 7). I take it that Job is being commended for wanting to continue the conversation with God, refusing to blame himself for what had befallen him. The book of Job, it seems, was written to address the question of why bad things happen to good people. Ultimately, there is no answer except that God has created this universe as it is and that God, the creator of the universe, is still interested in having friendship with us human beings even when we rage against the misfortunes that so often befall us without any fault of ours. What is your reaction?

THE "JUST WORLD HYPOTHESIS"

The friends of Job had tried to use the usual theological and philosophical explanations of catastrophe, but Job would have none of them. He refused to lie and to blame himself. He refused the "just world hypothe-

"We have freedom and can refuse to live up to our own best ideals and God's own hopes."

sis" which lays the blame for any disasters that happen on the backs of those who suffer the disasters. Of a woman who was raped, for example, one hears statements such as, "She must have been asking for it;" or "Why was she out at night without someone to protect her?" Of the victims of hurricanes one hears: "Why did they live so close to the shore?" Job could not accept the arguments of his friends who seem to have been operating with this hypothesis. He wanted to speak directly to God. Of course, he can come across as petulant and angry. But what seems to have pleased God was that Job would not accept false answers and wanted to speak directly to God. Job wanted to continue the friendship by continuing the conversation.

The Carmelite Iain Matthew, commenting on John of the Cross, says of Job's final response:

This [response] is the freedom of being able to stand at the back of the temple and say, because now any other statement would be an irrelevance, "God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:14). It means, not cringing submission, but the knowledge that I am part of something bigger than I had ever realized. It brings that mixture of awe, excitement and shame I feel when the one I had been instructing turns out to be a genius. It is knowledge of God which, John [of the Cross] says, leads one to treat him with new "respect" and "courtesy."

I don't have an answer to the question of why there is so much evil and pain in this world. All I can do is to encourage you if you have questions about God's ways to speak directly to God, as one friend to another, even if rage and anger are the only emotions you can voice. The book of Job, I believe, encourages such honest

“What seems to have pleased God was that Job would not accept false answers and wanted to speak directly to God.”

relating with one's friend and indicates that God is willing to respond, even if the response is not, at first hearing, as comforting as we might hope for.

GOD'S WILL

Often enough when bad things happen, whether in the form of natural disaster or human evil or just the breaks of life, we hear words such as these: “God willed this hurricane in order to strengthen us and to draw us closer to himself;” “God wanted your mother to die so as to be happy in heaven where she will watch over you;” “God wills whatever happens to us for our good.” An example is given in a letter John of the Cross wrote to a nun who was experiencing great pain because she had been moved to another convent: “It is His Majesty who has done this, to bring you greater profit” (cited in Ian Matthews). Such explanations seem to presume to know God's intention. I would prefer not to ascribe to God an intention I do not know. Then, the mystery of evil, whether it comes through natural disaster or human means or seemingly random events, remains a mystery that places us squarely before the question of who God is.

When we think of God as the ultimate fixer of everything, we get into trouble explaining natural disasters and human evil. God creates and sustains a world of shifting tectonic plates, of complex climactic interactions and other such phenomena that, at times, cause havoc with human lives. That is in the nature of the universe that God creates and we inhabit. God does not intervene to stop the shifting of the plates or to change climactic conditions. And when it comes to human evil, if God did not stop the crucifixion of Jesus, then, perhaps, God cannot change human hearts unless those hearts agree to change. God, of course, wants to influence our hearts, but God cannot coerce them to change.

God is not Mr. Fixit. But God is present, active and sustaining our universe, at all times. The questions God

poses at the end of the book of Job point to the immensity of the universe God creates and sustains. At the heart of this immense universe is God, desiring it into existence and sustaining it in existence at every moment. Why certain things happen, such as the rape of a child, genetic abnormalities, shifting tectonic plates causing tsunamis, the early death of a beloved spouse, enforced celibacy in someone who desires a mate, are part of the mystery of the universe. We may learn the scientific explanation of some of these phenomena, and we may learn, through such explanation, how to prevent some of them in the future, but the mystery will remain because ultimately we can never know the mind of God. If we could, God would not be God.

Commenting on the letter of John of the Cross just cited, Iain Matthew notes that, for John, what turns pain into something ultimately positive is trust in God: “... grieve, address what can be addressed, do not condone the sin that may be causing the situation; but trust that the Father holds this situation in his hands, and will turn it into a blessing.” I would add to “grieve,” “rage at God” if that is how you feel. The trust that Matthew, citing John of the Cross, recommends comes from prior experience of God as the Creator who desires you and everyone else into existence for the sake of friendship. Sometimes, John of the Cross and Iain Matthew remind us, we find ourselves in situations that can only be endured with blind trust in the God we have met and come to believe in.

I have met people who have found such blessing even in terrible situations. Probably you have met such people as well. John of the Cross came to his conclusion about God through the ordeal of a near-fatal harsh treatment and imprisonment by his own brother Carmelites. In such terrible circumstances he found God's presence as a sustaining, passionate love. During that ordeal he wrote his love poems to God, poems that are still considered classics in Spanish literature. He seems to have believed that he could not have known God so well without this imprisonment.

Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman living during the awful days of the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam, found God before ultimately dying in Auschwitz. On the 26th of May, 1942 she wrote this prayer.

It is sometimes hard to take in and comprehend, oh God, what those created in Your likeness do to each other in these disjointed days. But I no longer shut myself away in my room, God, I try

to look things straight in the face, even the worst crimes, and to discover the small, naked human being amidst the monstrous wreckage caused by man's senseless deeds. I don't sit here in my peaceful flower-filled room praising You through Your poets and thinkers. That would be too simple, and in any case I am not as unworldly as my friends so kindly think. Every human being has his own reality, I know that, but I am no fanciful visionary, God, no schoolgirl with a "beautiful soul." I try to face up to Your world, God, not to escape from reality into beautiful dreams – though I believe that beautiful dreams can exist beside the most horrible reality – and I continue to praise Your creation, God, despite everything.

As the train left Holland for Auschwitz where she was killed, she tossed out a note that read: "We have left the camp singing." Amazing, isn't it, that such words could have been written in the midst of that horror.

Recall Jesus' words to the disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (Luke 24: 26). I do not take these words to mean that God desired the crucifixion of Jesus; if this were the case, it would mean that God desired that Judas betray Jesus, that the Jewish leaders condemn him, that Pilate in weakness order him to be crucified, that Jesus die this awful death. God is Mystery itself, whose intentions we will never fathom.

Rather, I take it that Jesus means that he could not be the Messiah he in fact is without these horrible things happening. If they had not happened, he would be a different Messiah; he would not have the marks of the crucifixion on his risen body. All that we know of God's intention is that Jesus is the Messiah promised to the Israelites. A Portuguese proverb says: God writes straight with crooked lines. God, we believe, wrote straight with the crooked line of the rejection of the Messiah. God, we trust, writes straight with all the crooked lines that touch so many human lives throughout history. More we cannot know of the mystery of evil; more we need not know if we trust that God truly is our friend, or as a Portuguese

translation of the book of Wisdom has it, truly "amigo da vida," friend of life (Wisdom 11:26).

GOD HAS SHARED OUR LOT

Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth was and is God incarnate. In him God participated in the lot of all humans. Jesus' parents were forced to leave their home in Nazareth for Bethlehem for a Roman census while Mary was very close to childbirth. In Bethlehem Jesus was born in a stable. The young family was forced into exile in Egypt to escape the madness of King Herod. Jesus, it seems, lost his father Joseph sometime before he began his public ministry. Finally, the leaders of his own religion handed him over to the Roman occupiers to die a horrible death. God is no stranger to suffering. God's desire for friendship with us knows no bounds, it seems. God, in Jesus, knows what human life is like from the inside. Our friend wants to share all our joys and sorrows.

Life throws us many curve balls, things we do not wish for and rightly try to avoid. If we want to live with some peace and happiness, and if we believe in God, we must, at some level, be able to say "yes" even to these curve balls. The prophet Habakkuk seems to have been able to say "yes" to God in spite of great calamities. We might ask God to help us to say something like this.

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;

I will exult in the God of my salvation
(Habakkuk 3: 17-18).

RECOMMENDED READING

Hillesum, E. *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-43*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1985.

Matthew, I. *The Impact of God: Soundings from John of the Cross*. London: Stoughton & Stoughton, 1995.

The *Wisdom* of Limits



Mary Elizabeth Kenel, Ph.D.

When examining the qualities characteristic of persons known for their wisdom, we focus largely on examples of positive growth and development. We seek to identify the seeds planted early in life that flourished and matured over the years. At times, however, darker elements are observed, such as the need for mourning losses, accepting physical diminishments brought on by illness or aging, and facing up to mortality. Rather than rejecting these elements, we are encouraged to experience them consciously as they, too, offer opportunities for growth.

One of the many elements that contribute to the development of wisdom is the need to accept limits. Despite our efforts to attain self-knowledge and a deep understanding of others, we are inevitably faced with situations that seem to end in impasse, appearing to defy our efforts to deal with them rationally. Our horizons shrink to simple recognition of pain and suffering that seemingly have no meaning.

In circumstances marked by ambiguity and darkness, we are invited to open ourselves to other ways of knowing and understanding that are not tied to logical analysis and rational planning. At such moments, our imagination, our intuitive awareness empowers us to break free from our accustomed modes of thinking. It is as if we learn to see in the dark, as we open ourselves to the interaction of the conscious and unconscious elements of our being. These ele-

ments help us organize and re-organize the material of our lives. They often make their activity known to us through archetypal images that give us new insights and help us to make meaning of our lives and our world. In times of impasse, our images often present themselves in the form of metaphors that oblige us to move beyond the literal to seek deeper levels of meaning.

Situations of impasse may be thought to function like a *koan*, a Japanese word for the tests presented to us in life, problems not amenable to simple logical solution. *Koans* given to Zen students by their master make statements or ask questions that are, at their literal level, ambiguous, even absurd. Their purpose is to encourage the students to move from the ordinary levels of rational, logical thinking to a new level of insight through meditation.

Although the situation of impasse initially appears to be one in which the foundations of our being and our sense of security are shattered, if the limits of our power can be acknowledged and lived, we are offered a path to alternative ways of knowing. Living through a period of impasse is no simple matter, however. The pathways of imagination and intuition are often convoluted, intertwined in ways that seem to confuse us rather than offer direction. The new vision we seek is not given on demand but only after we struggle with the elements of our particular problem. The more we assert our will to control, the deeper the darkness is likely to become. If, however, we can open ourselves to the experience consciously, maintaining our awareness while not demanding understanding in order to control or predict the outcome and if we can experience the reality of our own finiteness, we may then come to the threshold of mystery.

Job, for example, after a long struggle with the problem of evil and the suffering inflicted on the just, came to a recognition of the limits of his own frame of reference. Moving from a simple posture in which good was rewarded and evil punished, he began to recognize a far more complex reality. Finding his former images of God shattered and the conventional wisdom offered by his friends unsatisfactory, Job tasted the sorrow of his finitude and experienced to the full his powerlessness. He wrestled with his need to achieve an understanding that would allow him to feel a sense of control and predictability before he came to bow before the mystery of a God whose ways are inscrutable, whose power, justice and righteousness are far beyond human understanding.

ENCOUNTERING MYSTERY

Entering into the realm of mystery, we soon recognize that the realities of the universe are neither neat nor pretty. Outside the bounds of reason, logic or human control, they often evoke a sense of fear when we encounter them. As Job recognized, many aspects of human life defy our sense of justice and the right ordering of things that gives us a sense of security and predictability. Efforts to explain such events in terms of causality fall short. Adequate answers cannot be found at the rational level but only at the deeper level of cosmic mystery.

The shift from the ordinary levels of thought and understanding is critical to reaching the sort of insight that opens us to a new world-view. Recognizing the limits of our ways of knowing, we come to an appreciation of mystery that we might term seeing the wisdom of the question. Rather than seeking immediate answers, we, like the Zen students, begin to contemplate the situation of impasse and, over time, reach an ability to live with mystery, to appreciate the question itself. As we come to accept the limits of reason and logic, we encounter mystery, not in the form of a gap in our knowledge and understanding that we feel compelled to fill but as the mysterious wholeness of life that is open-ended, and ever evolving.

Jungian psychologist and author Helen Luke suggested that delving into the mystery of things represented the final responsibility of each person's life. She highlighted the opportunity offered elders to see at the heart of every manifestation of life, even the most trivial, the *mysterium tremendum* that is God. Rather than focusing on the partial, limited truths offered by ordinary levels of knowledge and understanding, the true mystery that we are invited to explore, Luke indicated, is the eternal paradox at the root of life itself that reveals the whole, not the part. Our acceptance of this mystery touches all of life with wonder and opens to us a moment of unclouded vision.

EXISTENTIAL LIMITS

As we consider the acceptance of limits, especially the limits related to knowledge and understanding, we are invited to give some thought to the way in which these limitations lead us into situations involving existential guilt. Those who have entered upon a period of life review are sometimes reminded of experiences of failure, even of tragedy, that they actively brought on

“Recognizing the limits of our ways of knowing, we come to an appreciation of mystery that we might term seeing the wisdom of the question.”

themselves or others or were simply unable to prevent. Whether or not we make a formal life review, however, all of us are challenged at some time to face and own our guilt if we are to grow into the fullness of wisdom.

Guilt of this sort is termed existential guilt because it is the product of our limitedness, our finiteness. It is a part of our human condition and, as such, is unavoidable. Existential guilt springs from the fact that many of our crucial life decisions are based on less knowledge, less awareness, than is potentially available to us at the time. In such situations we remain responsible for our decisions, despite the fact that we have excellent reasons for our not knowing more when they were made, and bear the burden of guilt. “If I had only known...” is a refrain that often accompanies our later reflections on these choices.

Accepting limits, recognizing the existence of tragedy and guilt as part of our lives, is a necessity if we are to experience further growth. Although some sort of haphazard fate does not blow us about, neither are we totally in control of all the circumstances of our lives. Were we to know everything necessary to reach a decision, we would be determined by the very fact of that knowledge, rather than making a genuine choice. And it is in making choices and being willing to bear the consequences that we can taste something of the joy of freedom that is based in our acceptance of the limits of our comprehension.

Considering the limits imposed on us by our own finiteness tends to make us uncomfortably aware of being subject to contingency, vulnerable to anxiety as we recognize our separateness from others, fearful of our loneliness and isolation in the face of inevitable death. Despite our efforts to know and to understand, as well as the technological advances through which we seek to control our lives, we are troubled by doubt and the unavoidable knowledge of the limits of our power.

Rather than hide from these disturbing realities, however, we are invited to explore them and eventual-

ly to move beyond the impasse of contingency and death, as well as the anxiety, sometimes despair, they generate. Contemplation of these realities requires courage and fosters its growth. To face the limitations of our finitude courageously opens us to the full darkness of impasse. The choices are stark. Despair? Or a leap of faith into the unknown?

Viktor Frankl, speaking of his experiences in the concentration camps of World War II, stressed the importance of this choice. Remembering those prisoners who shared their food and offered comfort to others, he observed:

They may have been few in number but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom... (*Man’s Search for Meaning*, Pocket Books, 1971, p. 104)

MYSTERY OF FAITH

Our acceptance of the mysterious darkness of the unknown slowly enhances our sense of rootedness, of being grounded in and connected to the whole of life. Our leap of faith is an affirmation of our own being, of our sharing in the awesome reality of creation, of our being conscious of our participation in life.

Faith, as understood in this context, is defined as a quality of the person, not as a belief in a particular doctrinal system. It is a capacity to see, feel and act in terms of a transcendent dimension. Such faith is dynamic and growing, rooted in the source of our human personality and drawing upon that which constitutes us in the uniqueness of our selfhood. Faith is a mode of knowing that is not limited to intellectual activity. Faith carries with it the biblical sense of knowledge reached through relationship, through participation in the reality of that which we desire to know. Faith shapes our lives over time, opening us to a heightened receptivity to the ambiguous and hidden mystery of our individual selves and others. As it deep-

ens our perception, it moves us from a simplistic, either/or view of life and expands our capacity to tolerate complexity and paradox.

Faith leads us to define ourselves through our choices. It invites us to take a stand and commit ourselves to a lifestyle that embraces our values, for faith derives its significance from its ability to foster lives of dedicated responsibility. It is most fully reflected in our capacity for love and self-commitment. Although our commitments are frequently expressed through our participation in various endeavors, the essence of commitment lies in being present in the moment of choice, making the choice, and accepting responsibility for the consequences. Genuine commitment is only possible when we accept responsibility for our lives, when we become authors of our lives and are not merely acted upon by forces outside ourselves. Genuine commitment is the outgrowth of our response to poet Mary Oliver's question: *Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?* ("The Summer Day," *New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, p. 94).

In taking the courageous leap of faith that results in making commitments, we participate actively in our lives, expressing our being in freely chosen action that requires a total involvement of our person. This level of participation marks the way we live our lives, an expression of authentic identity. As we become the authors, the creators of our lives, through the choices we make, we resolve the impasse instigated by realizing our finitude. Through choice, we create meaning where there was only emptiness.

Sometimes, as we strive to create meaning, we are seized by some value that assumes a position of central significance in our lives. While we may be slow to recognize its centrality, over time we become aware of a decision to orient ourselves to its expression. The choice to focus our being in a certain way, to bring our faith and commitment, our creativity and our love, into harmony with this value or purpose is termed devotion.

THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

Throughout our lives we encounter situations involving suffering that may either stunt or cripple us or lead us to transformation. Suffering allows us to come to an acceptance of limits and to discover the wisdom contained therein. It helps us to move out of our ego-attachments, good as many of them may be,

and opens us to the mystery we often name grace. Suffering helps us let go of old ways and means and directs us to new learning. It is a process of emptying and purification that strips away our pretenses and illusions and prepares us to receive a clearer vision, a fullness of spirit.

Each of the major religious traditions has made an effort to understand the role of individual and societal suffering, and to present this role in a context that opens the possibility of meaning in situations that might otherwise be viewed as negative or evil. Buddhism, for example, notes the impermanence of this life and our resistance to this impermanence. The changeableness of life, which is in conflict with our drive to achieve permanence and stability, becomes a source of suffering when we fail to accept reality's limits and attach ourselves to any particular person, place, thing or state of being. In recognizing this clash between what we *want* and what *is*, we begin to attend to the limits and, paradoxically, to the wholeness of life. Rather than chasing our ideals of perfection, we are able to recognize the perfection of impermanence.

Much of the biblical wisdom literature, while acknowledging the complexity of the human condition and human experience, offers rules for right living. Those who observe them faithfully are to be blessed with *length of days and years of life and abundant welfare* (Proverbs 3:2); their barns are to be *filled with plenty* and their vats *bursting with wine* (Proverbs 3:10). Nevertheless, the author of the book of Job was mindful of wisdom's need to embrace the hard questions posed by suffering. Job's story most certainly called into question the link, if any, between one's relationship with God, one's observance of the rules of right living, and one's well-being and happiness. And for many readers, the story's outcome is unsatisfactory for the impasse experience of suffering remains unresolved. Yet as author John Goldingay notes, there are hints that help us move beyond the dilemma posed in the story of Job. One hint is the fact that "life's worthwhile questions tend not to have answers; otherwise they would not be worthwhile questions." Another hint suggests that we, like Job, come to recognize that the world does not revolve around us and is not arranged in such a way as to ensure that all our needs are met. Such recognition moves us, like the ancient Israelites, to the concept of a larger, cosmic morality and justice.

Christianity, on the other hand, traditionally

offered a view of suffering as the path to future glory, a perspective often misunderstood and applied in ways that have served only to maintain an unjust *status quo*. At other times, this view of suffering was perceived as a way to deny harsh realities, offering the opium, as it were, of eternal life.

More recent understandings, however, move beyond the concept of redemptive suffering. While one must still surrender to suffering, its acceptance is not as an end in itself or as a means to an end, be it termed redemption or eternal glory. Rather, as feminist theologian Cynthia Crysdale observes, it is surrender as recognition of both finitude and the law of the cross. One cannot erase moral evil or any other evil by fiat; the cycle of injustice, of victim and perpetrator, can only be reversed through someone's suffering rather than retaliating. The cross and resurrection stand as events and symbols that set up a matrix of new meanings that are potentially, but not necessarily, transformative.

Another feminist theologian, Elizabeth Johnson, notes that all forms of political and liberation theology repudiate the interpretation of Jesus' death as required by God in repayment of sin. Recognizing that Jesus' challenge to the validity of relations based on dominance and submission made the fact of his suffering most probable, she presents the suffering and death of Jesus as a way through which God enters into solidarity with all those who suffer and are lost.

Psychology has also played a part in addressing the meaning of suffering. Helen Luke suggested, for example, that the cure for depression lay in the acceptance of real, rather than neurotic, suffering, not in seeking to replace depression with pleasant feelings. She saw the root of suffering in the conflict we experience while longing for growth and freedom yet refusing to accept that our development requires that we challenge the supremacy of our ego demands. We would rather endure neurotic misery than consent to the death of our sense of self-importance.

Frankl's efforts to assist his fellow survivors during the horrors of Nazi concentration camps focused on the will to meaning. As a result of his own experiences and those of others, he recognized, as Gordon Allport put it in the preface to *Man's Search for Meaning*, that "to live is to suffer; to survive is to find meaning in the suffering." If indeed we are to find a purpose in life, we must also find a purpose in suffering and dying; its exact nature cannot be told to us. We must discover it and accept the responsibilities prescribed by our answer.

We are faced with grave crises that threaten our society and world, having come, it seems, to a period marked by societal impasse. Despite our wealth as a nation, we are plagued with poverty, violence, environmental disasters, and illnesses such as AIDS that are claiming millions of lives. We continue to marginalize others along lines of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religion. No matter how hard we work, it appears that these problems yield to no solution.

Yet in the midst of these apparently futile struggles there is renewed interest in meditation, spirituality, and contemplation, which help us to empty out and open up. The experience of impasse, whether felt at the personal or societal levels, acts as an impetus and offers a concrete focus for prayer as we respond to pain, suffering, tragedy, and loss. It urges us to contemplation in hope that new solutions, new visions of peace and equality will emerge.

THE WISDOM OF THE CROSS

In addition to viewing suffering as a sharing in the redemptive work of Christ, Christian tradition from the time of St. Paul has held up the idea of the cross as a mystery and a symbol of wisdom. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (1:18-2:16) presents his reflections on these topics. The wisdom he speaks of in this context confounds and contradicts the wisdom of those we might think of as wise and is contrasted with what he terms the false wisdom of the world.

A superficial reading of Paul and subsequent spiritual writers may lead us to think that suffering itself is exalted in a way that is exaggerated at best or even masochistic. Certainly there has been a tendency to valorize suffering, especially when the victims were powerless women, children, or members of minority groups. Quite rightly, those who bore the brunt of such suffering have begun to raise questions. Crysdale has addressed issues in which the theology of the cross has been misused to maintain women and others in their status as silent victims. Suggesting that our understanding of redemption is itself in need of redemption, she proposes a theological model of the cross that demands a conversion to a higher viewpoint.

In calling for this conversion, Crysdale aligns herself with Paul and those spiritual writers who continued to reflect on and distill the meaning of his message. According to the wisdom tradition, then, it is not suffering itself that is sought or valued but the invita-

tion to enter into the mystery of the cross, the opportunity to contemplate the perception of design in God's revelation that is presented as a source of spiritual joy.

Paul's understanding of the cross as mystery refers, in part, to the fact that it is a hidden wisdom made known not to the rulers of this age but to those who are taught by the Spirit of God. In its aspect of mystery, then, the cross serves as a resolution of the impasse we experience when faced with the limits of our human knowledge and understanding. Commenting in a similar vein, theologian Bernard Lonergan spoke of *inverse insight*, which opens up new horizons but does so, not by grasping the point or seeing a solution to a given situation but by discovering that the intelligibility we sought to find is simply not there to be discovered.

Precisely because the cross cannot be understood by the mind or in strictly intelligible, rational human terms, it serves as a sign of the reconciliation of opposites, the revelation of a greater truth than we, in our finiteness, can encompass. It holds the paradoxes of knowing and unknowing, pain and sweetness. In reflecting on the mystery of the cross as a way of moving through and beyond a situation of impasse, we find that through its revelation of a larger, broader, deeper pattern, another way of thinking, feeling, and experiencing is opened for us.

Jung recognized something of this truth when he said that Christian ethics leads to *collisions of duty* and that wholeness is achieved only through the experiencing and integration of these opposites.

Drawing from contemporary physics as well as Jungian psychology, physicist John Hitchcock spoke of the *necessary pain* we encounter in the process of transformation. From his perspective, obstacles and conflicts play a significant role in our transformation as they move us from a lack of awareness to the fullness of consciousness in which we feel the specific demands the conflict makes upon us. Only then can we begin the journey to wholeness.

Elizabeth Johnson also takes up the theme of cross as the parable that enacts Sophia-God's participation in the suffering of the world. As such, she suggests,

Guided by wisdom categories, the story of the cross, rejected as passive, penal victimization, is reappropriated as heartbreaking empowerment. The suffering accompanying such a life as Jesus led is neither passive, useless, nor divinely ordained, but is linked to the ways of

"To live is to suffer; to survive is to find meaning in the suffering."

Sophia forging justice and peace in an antagonistic world. As such, the cross is part of the larger mystery of pain-to-life, of that struggle for the new creation evocative of the rhythm of pregnancy, delivery, and birth so familiar to women of all times (p. 159).

THE MYSTERY OF DEATH

Our exploration of limits would be incomplete if we did not turn our thoughts toward the limitations of knowledge and understanding summed up in the mystery of death. Of all the realities that are part of our lives, our finiteness is most concretely expressed in the fact that each of us will die. And the anxiety that our mortality arouses is probably the most basic, universal and inescapable anxiety that we can feel. Although we may try to banish it from our awareness, the fear of death often lurks beneath the surface and exhibits itself in a variety of symptoms that seemingly have little relation to death itself. *The Denial of Death*, written by cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker whose areas of interest included religion and psychoanalysis, deals with this theme in a striking way.

Courage in the face of such anxiety is expressed in our sense of rootedness whereby we develop awareness of our kinship to all experience, to all life, to all people. Rather than hide the reality of limits and endings, especially that of death, it is helpful to think about the process of living as that of a creative, artistic enterprise, not unlike that of painting a picture. Looked at in that light, part of the artistry involved in a particular creation is dependent on knowing when to stop, what to include and what to omit, and when to place a frame around the work and call it finished. Rather than fear limits, thinking that we may never find anything more, we need to use the opportunities at hand to appreciate the limits that can give a certain

artistry, grace, dignity, and meaning to our lives.

Our awareness of death can be a source of freedom, not merely one of dread. Instead of focusing exclusively on achievement, fame, or fortune, recognition of life's limits may serve to direct our attention to matters whose rewards are less tangible. Time spent with loved ones, for example, tends to become more precious as does inner work that develops our soul or deeper self, not merely our ego. Facing the mystery of death often encourages us to live at a deeper level, appreciating the joys we overlook because of their very dailiness. We are also encouraged to live more authentically, for decisions reached in light of our eventual deaths tend to reflect our deepest values.

The mystery of death is something we can never fathom. We may draw close to it as we witness another's death, but even that experience does not admit us into the fullness of the mystery. Our responses to death are many and varied. This is as it should be, for death's mystery is broad as well as deep. Poet Dylan Thomas, writing to his dying father, urged "Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Samuel Coleridge, writing on the death of a child, proclaimed "Ere sin could blight or sorrow fade, Death came with friendly care..." Keats, recognizing within himself something of an attraction toward death while listening to the song of a nightingale, wrote:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!

For many people approaching death, there is a sense of completion, of having finished the task that has been assigned, as it were, by life. This task may not be obvious, sometimes it is unobservable even to the eyes of contemplation and love. The task may be some form of inner growth that when accomplished brings us to a state of ripeness that sets in motion our transition to the final phase of life which is death.

Hand in hand with acknowledging life's impermanence and death's finality, however, runs a strong

thrust toward immortality. Although some may perceive the notion as a way of denying or negating the reality of death, the desire for and anticipation of eternal life exists in all cultures and is found at the heart of every religious tradition. Death, then, appears to be viewed not merely as a process of destruction of life as we know it but as a process of transformation. But such transformation is not reached without our experiencing deterioration and dissolution, passing through the gates of death and decay.

It is this promise of transforming rebirth that draws us forward in a spirit of hope. Set against the darkness, we hear Job's declaration "I know that my Redeemer lives, and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25-26).

RECOMMENDED READING

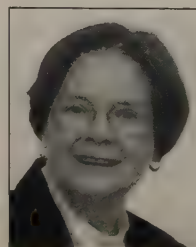
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Prayer Out of Passion

Anonymous



I recently came across this "memo to myself" written more than ten years ago. It seems even more valid to me now than when I first wrote it.

One of the two great issues that has focused and energized my spiritual struggle since childhood is sexuality—or I could say “sex” —or perhaps, “sexiness.” To accept myself as a sexual creature, to learn to love the sexual energy within me (that sometimes fairly sparks around me), to delight in the particularity of my body and its ways, to understand and appreciate the subtle and complex desires, urges and fantasies that bubble in my mind and heart—and yet to recognize that these urges and energies are, in my case at least, obsessive, addictive, fascinating and capable of luring me into fixation and self-destruction: this has been one of the great struggles, riddles, koans, and mysteries around which my relationship with God has crystallized and twined. Sometimes it seems that God has used my struggles in this area almost like a pulley to raise me slowly toward God.

A relationship of love, longing, desire; yearning to lose, drown, submerge self in other; hunger for fullness, completeness, consummation; desire to explore, expose and allow to surge all the beauty of maleness, femaleness, humanness and passionate divinity: how to integrate all that within myself or myself in That, how

to let all that miraculous potion, volatile yet vital as it is, be contained, decanted, in the fragile beaker of my being. That has been and still is one of the great questions that brings me to my knees before You.

Without all that, would I have a relationship with my God? Would I know of my desperate need of him? And yet, does not all that risk to corrode or explode my poor fleshly being, vessel, vial?

There are long spells when all seems easy and I wonder if the danger wasn't a dream. And then—the storm returns.

And the years of struggle, stress and failure have taught me so much—have taught me one thing: that behind all and every manifestation of desire—angel, devil, idol, fetish, form, scenario, organ, act—stands one great truth, or two: one, that I *need*, infinitely, urgently and desperately; and two *that You alone can fulfill my need. If I follow it far enough, back through all its manifestations, my need will lead me to You, to You alone.*

Because what I need is infinite love—and You alone can love me as I need. Infinite love, infinite tenderness, infinite release, infinite self-giving, infinite mastery, infinite consolation, infinite fruitfulness, infinite union—in You alone is my soul at rest. I need You, I long for You, I love You! Leave me not to my own devices, oh Lord, my God!

Written by a male Religious who wishes to remain anonymous.

The Fifty-Year Drought

James Torrens, S.J.

THE FOURTH DIMENSION

The fourth dimension has its night and day,
daytime for planting feet on the bare ground,
where the marked trail can vanish into night.

The fourth dimension has its airy way,
swelling the lungs of hikers upward-bound,
to leave them barely breathing on a height.

The fourth dimension—enter, all who pray—
is watery and floats you if you're sound,
but can propel you to a plunge and fright.

The fourth dimension is a dazzling ray
bred of the fire of fires. Glory redound
to Him who, to spare eyes, can withhold the light.

The letters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta to her spiritual directors, recently published, disclose, to the world's astonishment, her long-time sense of abandonment by God. Though her directors were my fellow Jesuits, I am halfway persuaded that, for ethical reasons, they should have respected her request to destroy them. What the documents do, now that we have them, is to lead us

deeper into that potent phrase we hear at Mass right after the consecration, "The mystery of faith." In this fourth dimension of our existence, faith, what unimagined highs and lows, adventures, surprises and ordeals, light and obscurity!

In his book, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, Father Brian Kolodiejchuk of the Missionaries of Charity Fathers, the postulator of her cause for canonization, does an admirable job of presenting these private messages, and is helpful in interpreting them. Above all he shows the remarkable consistency of this very single-minded religious, a missionary nun of the old school. Her devotion to Jesus centered on the Sacred Heart, as revealed in his passion and continued in the mystical body. Also she talked to her sisters with great familiarity about "Mother," her childlike way of alluding to the Virgin Mary.

EXPERIENCING THE DARK

Mother Teresa kept insisting that the true reason for existence of the Missionary Sisters was to satiate the thirst of Jesus—his "I thirst" on the cross—for love and for souls. She found herself moved by "one desire, to love God as he has never been loved," foolish though she felt in saying so. Early on she made a private vow not to refuse anything to God, which she understood to mean to act right away when asked. She was drawn to the "dark holes" of the poor, their hovels without light, and she accepted her own dark hole in identification with them. These themes are constants in *Come Be My Light*, and in her life.

The constant refrain, when Mother Teresa was baring her soul, was her trial of darkness, the sense of rejection by God. God, who had consoled her so palpably while she was a Sister of Loreto; Jesus whose voice urged her, during her train ride to Darjeeling (September 10, 1946), toward the poorest of the poor; this spouse of her soul left her entirely on her own as soon as Archbishop Périer of Calcutta approved her to start the foundation. God just slammed the door, it seemed. "There is no God in me—when the pain o

longing is so great—I just long and long for God—and then it is that I feel—He does not want me—He is not there” (to Father Joseph Neuner, circa 1961).

TRUTHS WE LEARN FROM MOTHER TERESA

Mother Teresa’s story brings home some verities to us. The first is that God, in the exercise of providence, treats each person specially and individually. Mother Teresa was indeed going to love God as no one else had, since there was no other her! Jean-Pierre de Caussade, in *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, put it this way: “God knows nothing of set rules; he grants grace as pleases him, and to whom he deems fit to accord it.” There cannot be a set pattern, but there is a tremendous logic, which one day gets illuminated. Here in Mother Teresa we find a strong and even commanding personality (like Mother Cabrini, like Ignatius Loyola) on whom the world would heap adulation. She would profit from the strong reminder that it is all God’s work, and God wants her aware of her own interior poverty. In recent history, we have seen all too many charismatic figures become full of themselves and take a heavy fall.

The second verity is that God listens to and takes seriously our personal offerings. Mother Teresa offered herself to share in Our Lord’s passion, and continually urged her sisters to do so, saying, “Love until it hurts.” That was the emphasis of her Christology. Jesus took her at her word. Contemporary spirituality veers away from this focus. Does it do so faint-heartedly?

The third verity is this. The great loneliness felt by Mother Teresa and her spiritual numbness (“Within me everything is icy cold,” 1955), amidst the expansion of her order and her availability to the world, bear out what Scott Peck insisted on in *The Road Less Traveled*. Infatuation, strong feeling is not where you find love. Love shows itself not in feelings but in the will. “Love is not effortless. Love is an act of will, it is both an intention and an action.” Mother Teresa, “torn between the feeling of having lost God and the unquenchable desire to reach Him” (Kolodiejchuk, p. 180), kept her commitment to the sick, the old and the dying. We may call it love in the dark hole.

What are we to make, personally, of Mother Teresa’s half-century without consolation? It may seem truly a singular phenomenon, but it is not. Any of us who read and pray the psalms recognize her cry of the heart. “Like a parched land my soul thirsts for you”

“Love is not effortless. Love is an act of will, it is both an intention and an action.”

(Ps. 143). Normally the psalms resolve their anguish in an expression of trust, but not always. Psalm 88, which the breviary entitles “Prayer of a person who is gravely ill,” harps on the following theme, “Your anger weighs down upon me:/ I am drowned beneath your waves.” And it concludes, “My one companion is darkness.” Psalm 88 is a song of bitterness. Whoever composed it? Psalm 44 is the voice of a whole people bemoaning to God their helpless disgrace before enemies. We have stayed faithful, they exclaim to the Holy One, “yet you have crushed us in a place of sorrows.” It is a Holocaust psalm, ending up in a desperate call: “Stand up and come to our help!” For how many people around the world today do these psalms speak!

IGNATIUS AND CONSOLATION

The topic, then, in Mother Teresa’s letters is absence of consolation. How, more exactly, are we to take this term “consolation?” For working definition, we have none better than that of Ignatius Loyola in his “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, Week One,” of the *Spiritual Exercises*. “By consolation I mean that which occurs when some interior motion is caused within the soul through which it comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord.” He further explicates: “I include every increase in hope, faith and charity, and every interior joy.” He was very clear always that consolation is gift, pure and simple.

In what we may call his novitiate at Manresa, Ignatius had to endure an alternation of spirits, including the polar opposite of consolation, desolation, times when he found no relish or savor in prayer, in the Mass or even in life itself. His anguishing scruples even tempted him to suicide. But God’s guidance steered him out of this crisis, and his life thereafter was filled with divine favor, so that he could say of himself many

years later that consolation prevailed in his life. "It seemed to him that he could not live unless he felt in his soul something that was not his own nor could come from man but only God" (*Selectae Sancti Ignatii Sententiae*, collected by Pedro Ribadeneira, S.J., in *Fontes Narrativi*, Vol. 3, p. 635). Thus for Ignatius consolation was as essential as breathing.

How differently God treats those whom he loves, that is to say, everyone. It is quite legitimate and even essential for each of us to pray continually for the action of the Holy Spirit within us. In the words of Psalm 27, for instance, we can say, "Your face, O Lord, do I seek." We can well pray along with Saint Thomas More: "Take from me, good Lord, this lukewarm fashion, or rather cold manner of meditation and this dullness in praying to you. And give me warmth, delight and life in thinking about you." How better to sum up the last fifty years of Mother Teresa's life than with the opening words of Psalm 42, where faith is so palpable: "As the deer longs for streams of water,/ so my soul longs for you, O God."

A STEADFAST DETERMINATION

Jean-Pierre de Caussade rephrases the teaching of Ignatius in his Rules: "In the states of dryness, darkness, insensibility and interior forlornness, all that we can do is to preserve in the highest part of the soul a sincere

and steadfast determination to belong wholly to God. The picture of Mother Teresa that emerges from *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* is of her doing exactly that.

Karl Rahner as theologian and as pastor of souls was deeply conscious of the wintry state of so many minds and hearts in our times. His two essays, "The Experience of Grace" and "The Experience of God" probe the dynamic force working within us and drawing to itself even those not very conscious of it. He points out that the surest experience of grace is a kind of dogged faithfulness to our Christian commitment amidst discouraging results, a hostile environment, lack of encouragement, our own uncertainties. He would agree with the drift of the fine *Time* magazine essay, September 3, 2007, which awakened the wide interest in Mother Teresa's letters. If she is up at 4:30 every morning for Jesus, if she goes to Mass eagerly a second time on days when the occasion offers, if she truly hurts from missing God, what else is that but deep faith?



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The Vocational Witness of the Dying:

PERSPECTIVES FROM PALLIATIVE CARE

Reena George, M.D.

As a palliative care physician I accompany people facing death. Dying people—on the interface of life here and life hereafter—can illuminate for us how the Kingdom of God is active in our different life journeys and vocations. In the pain and poignancy of that companionship, I learn many lessons. The helpless teach the helper the paradox of new life in death and of beauty in brokenness.

Since I am an oncologist by training, friends sometimes ask why I have moved from active and curative cancer therapy to work in such a “depressing specialty.” One answer of course, is that palliative care is a challenging field that is underdeveloped in India. A second is that severe pain needs attention. But a third and deeper answer lies in a sense of vocation, in apprehending a Kingdom of God that is here, but not yet. As I grapple with questions of what God is calling me to do, with all my fears, inadequacies and imperfections, three parables of the Kingdom—the seed, the yeast and the weeds—speak to me, through the dying people I see, of life and vocation.

DYING TO NEW LIFE, SEEDS OF THE KINGDOM

First is the seed that dies to produce new life. It is not easy for a seed to leave its mature identity, inexplicably to destroy what it was created to become and to be hidden and pressed down within the earth. We, too, can find ourselves struggling when a vocational call summons us to leave colleagues and familiar ways of working, to become vulner-



"We are not God, and our imperfections make room for His grace."

able to unfamiliar pressures, sometimes alone and in darkness. Yet when we are thus dying emotionally or socially, we may be beginning a new identity in God's plan.

Physical death too is a form of birth, as was brought home to me very tangibly and poignantly. We were caring for a teenager with disseminated cancer. The boy's abusive and alcoholic father had died when he was fourteen. He then left school to work as a tailor to pay off his father's debts and support his mother and younger brother. When he was seventeen, he developed cancer that became refractory to treatment and spread to his lungs.

During the last month of his life, he was very short of breath and could only sleep fitfully, sitting up. We had taught his mother to administer injections at home since they lived so far away from the hospital. Almost till the end, the boy used to load the injections himself because his mother's hands trembled; his own were skilled from threading the needle. Life had given him so little. It was deeply moving to see the courage with which he had responded to whatever had come his way.

On most nights his mother slept on the floor beside his bed in their two-room hut. On the eve of his nineteenth birthday, he asked her to sit on the bed so that he could rest on her as he slept. They fell asleep, both seated. When she awoke, she found that her son had died on her bosom on the dawn of his birthday; symbolic somehow that we too will leave the impermanent womb of this Earth to be born into the arms and the timeless world of God who birthed us and gave us life.

LITTLE GIFTS AND NEW LIFE—THE YEAST OF THE KINGDOM

In our imperfectly lived vocations we may perhaps touch only one other life. But the support or comfort or inspiration we bring to that one life at a point of need may enable it to touch many more. A small service we may have done could enable someone else to do much more. One Easter candle lights another and the light spreads exponentially just as yeast multiplies by budding.

Somehow, a small unattractive fungal ball, unsavory itself, can change insipid starch into sweet bread or flat grape juice into sparkling wine. God has myriad ways of transforming the little we are able to do and offer.

One of the most remarkable persons I have met was the husband of a fifty-year-old patient who was dying. The patient had wanted to be an organ donor, but since she had cancer the organs could not be given to a living recipient. It was planned, therefore, that after she died her body would be donated to the medical school.

One day her husband told me that someone had said to him that the Department of Anatomy would not accept a cancer patient's body in its entirety. They would bury it and dig up the bones later. I was shocked at this false and insensitive statement and tried to clarify and apologize. The man replied, "It was hard to hear that they wanted to bury her and dig up her bones. But when we give a gift, who are we to decide what should be done with it? That would not be true giving. You can use her body in whatever way you need." I was deeply moved by the greatness of a man who, standing beside a dying wife, could so graciously and unstintingly leave us such a legacy of love and knowledge.

WEEDS AND WOUNDEDNESS—THE GRACE OF THE KINGDOM

Such striking examples of generosity can sometimes overwhelm us because we are not all like that. We are selfish; we have very finite limitations as to what we feel able to do. There are many times when we are unable to give what is needed because we are tired and drained out. Slowly, I have come to realize that we are all imperfect and limited to different degrees. We are not God, and our imperfections make room for His grace. Thomas Green, writing on Ignatian discernment, refers to the limitations and weaknesses interwoven into our personalities as the weeds among the wheat. God can deal with our limitations in many ways. Good things can happen both because of our limitations and in spite of our limitations.

How can we be effective because of our limitations? An analogy I find helpful is that of a paintbrush which could feel inadequate because it is not as firm or as strong as a pencil or of a pencil that feels inferior because it cannot display the colors of a paintbrush. Yet, the qualities of a pencil would not make an effective paintbrush. I am learning to accept that the talents I do not have define me as much as the gifts I have been given. If God has created me to be a paintbrush

it isn't worth envying the qualities of a pencil.

This does not mean that we remain stuck in the oddities of our personalities. We allow God to change what needs to be changed, to remove the weeds when the time is right. A paintbrush has to be submerged and wrung out; a pencil periodically has to lose a part of itself. When this painful pruning occurs, all we can do is to be aware of what is happening, and surrender in trust to the vinedresser in charge of our lives.

A carved brass lamp that hangs in the chapel of our medical school symbolizes how God can use us in spite of our limitations. During the final blessing of the evening prayer, when all other lights are turned off, the apertures in the body of the lamp and the darkness outside allow beautiful patterns of light and shade to be created. The lamp can compose such loveliness only because it is empty, wounded and dependent on another source of inner light. Its emptiness allows it to be transparent to the source of light within. Our souls too, need to become increasingly transparent to the light of God who dwells within us all. The lamp's true light and beauty come not from itself. God alone should be our light and our beauty and our strength. The holes cut in the lamp let light through; our wounds and brokenness become channels of God's grace. If the lamp had no defects, it would not be effective; if we had all the answers and all the resources, we would not be open to God's abundance.

LIVING AND DYING—OUR VOCATIONS IN AND FOR THE KINGDOM

Frederick Buechner, the American Presbyterian minister and writer, says, "The place God calls us to is the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Yet our different vocations, whether within or outside the institutional church, will inevitably also cause us pain, and within that unfolding space we hurt, trust, and grow; as so beautifully expressed by the Benedictine monk, Ralph Wright:

Anoint the wounds
of my spirit
with the balm
of forgiveness.

Pour the oil
of your calm
upon the waters
of my heart.

Take the squeal
of frustration
from the wheels of my passion
That the power
of your tenderness
may smooth
the way
I love.

That the tedium
of giving
in the risk of surrender
and the reaching
out naked
to a world
that must wound

may be kindled fresh daily
in a blaze of compassion
that the grain may fall gladly
to burst in the ground
and the harvest abound.
(Reprinted with the poet's permission)

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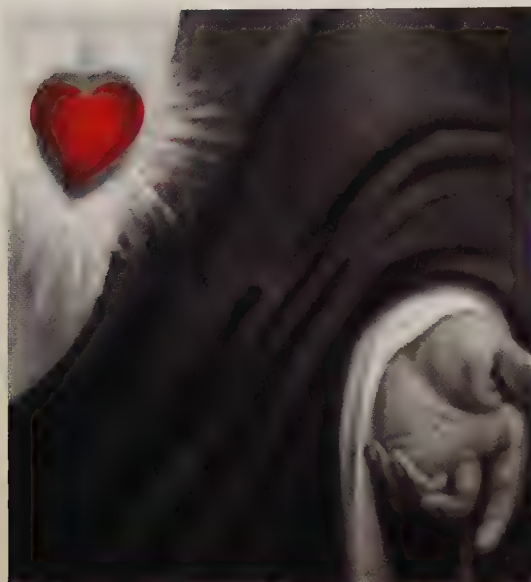
International Association for Hospice and Palliative Care: www.hospicecare.com has a number of books, professional and non-technical, and other publications listed for sale at reduced prices.

The National (USA) Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: www.nhpco.org lists a number of seminars to be held in the USA on the topic of care for the dying.



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The Priestly Heart



Reverend William P. Sheridan

Not too long ago I had the privilege of witnessing the wedding vows of a friend of mine. At the rehearsal dinner, the bride and groom made it a point to thank their bridesmaids and ushers for participating in the wedding by giving them gifts of appreciation and by saying a few words about each of them. After the bride had thanked her friends, she wanted to say “thank you” to her parents, but when she tried to do so, she broke down in tears. Through the sobs she was finally able to exclaim, “If I could just place my heart within you, *then you would know how I feel.*” Aside from the beautiful emotion that these words conveyed, they also revealed a profound insight. As human beings, we attribute certain fundamental characteristics to the heart. The heart is viewed as the seat of emotion and love, but it is also recognized as a place of understanding, resolve and commitment.

Christianity has always accepted the centrality of the heart and its movements to the life of faith. In *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* Robert Louis Wilken traces the early development of Christian doctrine and language about God. He writes, “Nothing is more characteristic of the Christian intellectual tradition than its fondness for the language of the heart” (p. 292). He maintains that this is the case because faith must engage both the mind and the heart to develop. In truth, Jesus’ ministerial outreach can be summed up, in a certain sense, as an appeal to the

heart. So it is quite natural that his disciples would also assert the centrality of the heart and its role in Christian formation.

The ministerial priesthood, if it is to be authentic, must be attentive to the heart as well. Priests need to imitate Jesus' appeal to the heart in their ministerial outreach. To do this, however, they must first come to a deeper understanding of their own hearts. Self-knowledge, human development and appreciation of the depths of their hearts will make them eminently more suited for ministry to God's people. What should a priest's heart look like? What should be inside it? Obviously, these are difficult questions to answer completely. I believe that two practices, however, can help priests to begin answering these questions for themselves: by first discussing some of the basic characteristics of a priestly heart, and secondly by challenging ourselves to have a deeper awareness of our own hearts (with their struggles and desires). This will go a long way in helping the priest's attempts to imitate Jesus.

SOME BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRIESTLY HEART

One could probably cite dozens of characteristics that should be a part of the priestly heart. The demands of the ministry today are such that it would likely be impossible to discuss every attribute of a heart seeking to be more like Jesus. I would like to examine, however, three characteristics that I believe are pivotal to the rest. The priestly heart is: biblical, pastoral and burdened. I think these three are pivotal because they are wide enough to provide an umbrella under which the priest's liturgical, ministerial and personal responsibilities can be examined.

A *biblical heart* is necessary for several reasons. To be an effective preacher and good presider the priest must know the Scriptures. This knowledge, however, must be more than a cursory knowledge. Now, more than ever, people hunger for the Word. Much of how priests are perceived by parishioners is based on how they are experienced at Sunday Mass. Some parishioners know priests through other ministerial situations and maybe even in social contexts, but the greater number of them will form their perceptions based on the homilies they hear and what they see in the sanctuary. Should priests place undue emphasis upon preaching and the liturgy for this reason? Or worse yet, should they judge themselves based solely on these realities? No, I do not think so. To do so would wrong-

The Word has an efficacy of its own; it is better to give no homily than a poorly prepared one.

ly turn priests into mere functionaries at the altar. A priest's worth and identity are tied to his relationship with Christ, not solely to what he does.

Priests, however, are charged to be as effective as possible in preaching Jesus Christ. They cannot do this properly unless they are formed by the Word. As a newly ordained, I remember a fellow priest telling me, after a rather poor homily I preached, "Look, if you don't have something substantial to offer in your homily do yourself and the people a favor and just sit down! The Word has an efficacy of its own; it is better to give no homily than a poorly prepared one." Needless to say, I was not flattered by his remarks; I thought he was a little harsh considering that it was one of the first times I had gotten into the pulpit. But it did leave me with a lasting impression of the seriousness of the preaching task and the power of the Word. All we can do is offer our best effort and the rest is up to the Holy Spirit, but our best effort will always depend on our knowledge of Christ and his Gospel.

People who seek a priest's advice and counsel, too, do so because they trust that he will have something to offer them spiritually. There are many places that people can go to receive counseling, but they come to priests because of their connection to Jesus. So it only stands to reason that knowledge of the Word will greatly assist these efforts as well.

Lectio Divina remains one of the best ways to enrich our own understanding of the Scriptures and to assist others in coming to a deeper awareness of God's love. Quiet reflection on the Scriptures and praying to the Holy Spirit to guide this effort is not only a simple process but a highly influential one. In *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* Michael Casey writes:

The ecclesial context of *lectio divina* enhances its power for good. Our union with the Church

helps us to be more integrally in contact with the revealed word. Christ and his Church are inseparable. There is a complementary truth. Our reading of the Scriptures contributes something to the Church as a whole. Our measure of openness to God is a means by which divine revelation enters this world to save it. We become receptors of grace with the capacity of transmitting further what we ourselves receive. We read in union with the whole people of God and so our reading is a source of energy for the whole Church. Like the spreading carpet of light at the Easter Vigil, we accept our small measure of the light of Christ, we communicate it to another and soon the darkness is transformed into a thousand points of light. *Lectio divina* enables God's word to be born once more in our hearts and in our world. Who knows the good that will result from it? (p. 42-43).

This is the efficacy of the Word that my brother priest was trying to communicate to me in his critique, and it is this Word that must shape a priest's heart. Seeing the Word take shape in us and enlighten us will serve to draw others to the Light!

Very few priests would disagree with the need for a *pastoral heart* because this forms the core of our vocation. Making room for others in our hearts is what engenders trust and confidence in us as ministers of Christ. Yet, this "living for others" or at least the attempt to put others first is never easy; it often constitutes the most difficult aspect of priestly life. In *The Lost Art of Walking on Water: Reimagining the Priesthood* Michael Heher calls attention to the need to reach a balance in our attempts to minister to others. Heher writes, "The only feelings for which we can be responsible are our own. And our hearts serve best when they are not always open or always closed but when each of us has a door in which he lets in what he thinks deserves to get in and bars the door to those things that are unfair, untrue, or cruel" (p.159). Being as honest as we can in this discernment is crucial because, as we bar the door of our hearts, we do not want to push experiences away simply because they may be painful or disconcerting. However, there are times when this is necessary. This is why I have found regular spiritual direction so helpful. My spiritual director can often point out things that I do not see. Discussing what Heher calls the "unfair, untrue and cruel" with another helps us clarify the language of the heart.

Joined uniquely to the pastoral heart is the *burdened heart*. I have been very fortunate to belong to a Priest's Support Group for a number of years. We try to meet monthly (which is often difficult due to schedules), to discuss one simple question, "Where have I experienced (or not experienced) Jesus Christ in my ministry in the past month?" I am often dumbfounded by the sheer enormity and weight of some of the things my brother priests bring up and grapple with. Most of these weightier issues amount to our carrying others in our hearts. In the course of ministry we encounter others in and through a wide variety of circumstances. It is not unusual to hear priests speak of moving from a morning Mass to a funeral and then on to an afternoon wedding. Although we address the needs as they arise, I do not think we often take stock of the yo-yo emotional range we require to be truly present to people in each circumstance. Loving others often means suffering with them or worrying about them. Using Heher's image of the door again, ministry often has a way of kicking the door to our hearts open. In the span of one day priests can hear of a marital crisis in one home, alcohol abuse in another, and tragic loss in a third. These issues weigh upon the heart.

Effective pastoral ministry will once again seek a balance in letting things in. Priests are consistently challenged to reach this balanced place. Getting there is often by a rocky path. For myself I have often felt that my heart would simply explode from it all. I have been comforted at times like these by St. John's words, "This is our way of knowing we are committed to the truth and are at peace before him no matter what our consciences may charge us with; for God is greater than our hearts and all is known to him" (1 John 3:19-20). My heart may falter under the strain, but God is greater than my heart. The burdens that rest in my heart are ultimately his anyway, so I can be at peace knowing that God alone can carry all burdens.

TO KNOW ONE'S HEART

Anyone who has tried to take the inner journey of the heart and spirit knows intimately the pain that can result. Sometimes in delving deeper, we do not like what we encounter. Julianne McLean writes:

Real self-knowledge does not mean a theoretical or intellectual knowledge of our human nature, but a real self-awareness, a heart

knowledge of ourselves from a perspective of inner unity. To really know ourselves means to be intimately familiar with, and continually study and observe, the structure of our being, its many functions and different parts, and the manifold conditions which govern how these functions work, interact and respond to the myriad life influences, demands and expectations (*Towards Mystical Union: A Modern Commentary on the Mystical Text "The Interior Castle" by St. Teresa of Avila*, p.119).

Part of the priest's structure of being and function revolves around three exigencies: his celibacy, how he handles his own vulnerability, and his ability or inability to abandon himself to the Lord. These, too, say a great deal about his heart.

Julienne McLean is correct to point out that we need to know ourselves from a perspective of inner unity. The *celibate commitment*, however, is often tainted by quite a bit of disunity. Ronald Rolheiser touches on this feeling of disunity when he writes, "Sex is a dimension of our very awareness. We wake up in the world and in every cell of our being we ache, consciously and unconsciously, sensing that we are incomplete, unwhole, lonely, cut off, a little piece of something that was once a part of the whole" (*The Holy Longing: The Search for Christian Spirituality*, p. 194).

Obviously these feelings are not limited to celibates but are a part of the human condition. Celibates are particularly susceptible, however, to the danger of a deeper isolation if we do not seek healthy sexual integration. I like Rolheiser's description of the conscious and the unconscious ache because it is realistic about the constancy of the yearning. I believe that it is the constancy (be it conscious or unconscious) of the desire for something more, that gnaws at celibates in a particular way. It can often give rise to a laziness within, as celibates see the struggle as an endless one.

Michael Heher rightly points out that deeper isolation and challenges to our celibacy are as much about listlessness as they are about lust (p. 58). Listlessness is deadly to a healthy spiritual life and wreaks havoc on the struggle for integration. One falls into a gradual inattentiveness to the demands of the commitment. Listlessness, according to Heher, is subtle and can manifest itself in many ways; from allowing our glance at an attractive parishioner to linger too long, to the types of books we choose to read and the movies we

watch. This, too, is why so many priests feel the effects of the current scandal so acutely. The great majority of priests have done nothing illegal, but we may know ourselves to be prone to listlessness, and this poses a challenge to our authenticity.

LISTENING TO EMPTINESS

I am continually brought back to a fundamental fact of my celibacy; that it is primarily about emptiness, an emptiness that I know speaks to me on the deepest level. It speaks to me but I am not always listening properly. I fall prey to what Ilia Delio calls, "cataracts of the heart" (*The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective*, p. 58). She goes on to clarify the importance of "seeing with the heart." For it is in our heart that we encounter the Mystery. She writes, "The mystery of God, at times, seems so lofty and beyond our ability to understand it; yet, it really lies within the human heart because the human heart dwells in and reflects the heart of God" (p. 46). What I am coming to understand is that I will never be able to encounter this Mystery if I do not listen to the emptiness in my heart and that I cannot listen if I am filling the emptiness with something other than God.

Listening with the heart means entering a frightening silence. In the celibate life, loneliness must be countered with solitude. In solitude I am open to and in tune with the Divine Other. In his *Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth intimates this encounter:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of thought,
And rolls through all things.

Reflective silence is the only way to breathe in this living air and to have it suffuse our heart. In the silence, we may even feel God roll through us.

Vulnerability, I believe, is also one of the structures of our being to which Julienne McLean says we must attend. If there is one reality that reflects the American

Ultimately, each of us must stand before the mystery of suffering and our own vulnerability to it, confronted with the challenge to abandon ourselves to God in trust, hope and confidence.

Catholic priesthood today, it is our vulnerability. Priests feel vulnerable to forces from both outside the Church and within it. Unfortunately, the sexual abuse scandal lies at the center of the maelstrom. The image of the priesthood has been horribly tarnished by the scandal and what seems like a limitless desire to keep it in the limelight. As understandable as this phenomenon is, it fosters a keen awareness of one's vulnerability as a priest. Priests also feel vulnerable even within the Church, not only to false accusations but to canonical procedures that appear void of due process. None of this has helped the relationship between priests and their bishops. Stephen J. Rossetti acknowledges the precarious nature of the post-Dallas relationship when he writes, "Priests today are feeling vulnerable and unsafe. They know that false allegations, while rare, do happen; and if accused, they do not think they will be treated fairly, that is, they fear they will automatically be treated as if they are guilty (*The Joy of the Priesthood*, p. 73). While recognizing that there have been problems with communication, failures in leadership and ecclesial processes, Rossetti sees many positive and hopeful signs, among them the new opportunity to embrace mutual fraternal support.

The scandal, though central in many priests' minds, is not the only source of vulnerability. The ministry itself brings the priest face to face with his vulnerability. Priests feel vulnerable to burn-out, personal weaknesses and failures, poor performance, excessive demands and expectations, and a seeming inability to get it right. Vulnerability goes hand in hand with suffering; and grappling with suffering, in addition to being a mystery, is never easy. In *The Unchanging Heart of the Priesthood: A Faith Perspective on the Mystery and the Reality of Priesthood in the Church*, Thomas Acklin

wisely points to the similitude between the experience of being vulnerable and its root meaning:

The challenge is provided by the Gospel radicalism of following Jesus Christ. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Yet the most personal way to follow Jesus Christ is by being vulnerable (vulnera, Latin for "wounds"), by entering into His body through His wounds, in an act of self-surrender which is an act of love towards God and neighbor. Entrance into His body is an entrance into a relationship with all the members of His body, especially the most wounded and suffering ones; the entrance into His body participates intimately in His personal interiority by participating in His prayer (p. 137-138).

Part of the problem with asking someone to identify with Christ in their suffering, however, is that this language can too easily be misunderstood. Suffering, in and of itself, is not a positive thing. Quite the contrary, the Christian tradition does not advocate suffering for the sake of suffering but rather views suffering as a potential avenue to God because God meets us there and redeems us there. Suffering in this view, then, is not necessarily a punishment or something sent by God. Ultimately, each of us must stand before the mystery of suffering and of our own vulnerability to it, confronted with the challenge to abandon ourselves to God in trust, hope and confidence. The challenge of this *abandonment* is yet another structure of our being. We are not fully autonomous. Our humanity and our world are contingent as well as sinful. The only way we progress spiritually is to trust that we are held in the loving embrace of God no matter what we experience. We can never reach this level of abandonment, however, without an intimate relationship with the Lord. Without devoting ourselves to intimate prayer the cataracts of our hearts will remain firmly in place, distorting our vision and threatening to further blind us. Our ministerial effectiveness, personal fulfillment and inner peace depend on this intimate relationship.

Surrendering to God and abandoning ourselves to him may strike us as a complete destruction of *the self* and thus can bring a degree of anxiety to our efforts especially if we are used to being a take-charge sort of person. But as most spiritual writers affirm, these thoughts are nothing but the assertion of the *false self* or an example of a cataract of the heart distorting our

vision. As Vilma Seelaus contends, after surrendering to the Lord in prayer, the Lord sets about accomplishing beautiful things within us and through us.

From this experience usually issues another important insight. Just as prayer and wanderings of the mind cannot be controlled, neither can the rest of life be controlled. In the process of surrender, our relationship to the rest of reality changes. In human relationships, we begin to let persons be. We have less need to control the lives of others or to take responsibility for their problems or shortcomings or to make them over, because being closer to the center room, the eyes of the soul begin to see the self and others through the eyes of God (*Distractions in Prayer: Blessing or Curse?*, p. 44-45).

Abandonment restores proper vision and brings the heart into union with God. Self-surrender enables us to see ourselves and others more clearly. We begin to see ourselves, and others as made in the divine image and likeness.

CONCLUSION

Priests need to be attentive to their hearts. If they wish to be effective in imitating Jesus' ministerial appeal to the heart, then they must be concerned about developing certain characteristics of their own priestly hearts. In order to accomplish this they need to challenge themselves to a deeper awareness of what is in their hearts (i.e., the celibate commitment, vulnerability and the need to abandon themselves to God). Being in ministry today is not easy; there are many demands and expectations. There are interior worries and vulnerability. Inside each priestly heart, however, is the desire to grow closer to the Lord Jesus and his people. It is a beautiful vocation, one filled with many consolations and joys; among which is the desire on

the part of the Lord that priests be fulfilled and happy in serving him. If we could only take this to heart, our journey would be more assured and peaceful. Jesus says to us, "If only I could place my heart within you, *then you would know how I feel*." The challenge is to let him do just that. Yes ... then we would know!

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Narrative, *Lectio Divina* and the Formative Process



Mary Pat Garvin, R.S.M., Ph.D.

Reading has always been a passion of mine. I can remember applying for my first library card at the ripe old age of nine. How I cherished that card keeping it safely tucked away for those weekly trips to the library. Though unknown to me at the time, the stories and narratives I devoured in book after book were slowly shaping my budding understanding of self, others, and my perception of the world.

Fast forward to a few years ago when the book *Walking a Literary Labyrinth: A Spirituality of Reading* by Nancy M. Malone, OSU, stopped me dead in my tracks as I hurried through a favorite bookstore. Taking the slim volume in my hands I kept repeating its subtitle: *A Spirituality of Reading*. Immediately I knew I had found a kindred soul.

Malone reminds us of the many ways in which reading and meditation resemble each other. Both are usually done alone and in silence. Our attention is focused and our whole selves – body, mind and heart – engaged. We are centered; our energy concentrated with no purpose other than the act itself (no multi-tasking here). We are, at that moment, only the reader...only the contemplative.

Our faith tradition has long recognized the intimate relationship between reading and meditation in the ancient practice of *lectio divina*. As my own appreciation of *lectio divina* has deepened over the years I have begun to refer to reading and meditation as “the sib-

lings.” I have also discovered, like many before me, that a commitment to the practice of *lectio divina* of Sacred Scripture soon spills over to a *holy reading* of the narratives and stories of one’s own life.

This article explores the ancient practice of *lectio divina* and its use within the formative process, specifically the apostolic year of the novitiate and temporary profession. Formation ministers are encouraged to adapt these reflections to the spirituality and charism of their own congregations.

CREATIVE USES ABOUND

A while back I had the opportunity to explore the practice of *lectio divina* with a group of formation ministers from various religious congregations. I suggested that we begin by tapping the wisdom of the group and eliciting the creative ways *lectio divina* was already being utilized within their formation programs.

One novice minister recounted a congregational practice known as “Sharing the State of the Heart.” An adaptation of this practice involves asking a novice to write by hand her experiences of the past week, focusing specifically on God’s presence and activity in the ordinariness of each day. Handwritten narratives rather than those composed on a computer usually promote a more meditative and reflective revisiting of life experiences.

During the apostolic year this practice can be continued and is particularly helpful if a novice is ministering at a great distance from the novitiate. Once again a novice writes by hand her experiences and mails them to the novice minister. In return, the novice minister prayerfully reads the narratives and composes a response. As the apostolic year draws to a close and the novice prepares for first profession, these now numerous “states of the heart” provide rich material for *lectio divina*. Tracing the development and deepening of one’s call to religious life is enhanced as the novice practices *lectio divina* with these truly sacred scriptures of the past year.

A second example of *lectio divina* within the formative process was entitled “The Walkabout.” Here during an international apostolic experience, novice and minister meet several afternoons a week for a contemplative walk through the streets and neighborhoods of the city. Although most of their attention is focused primarily upon a silent absorption of the realities surrounding them, they pause periodically to greet mothers and their children, or shopkeepers at the doors of

their storefronts. After the walkabout both novice and minister journal about what each has seen and heard, and how God’s presence and activity has been experienced. Later they exchange narratives and prayerfully read and pray (*lectio divina*) with the other’s reflections on the contemplative sojourn. Upon returning to the novitiate these narratives remain a concrete reminder of God’s in-breaking during the apostolic experience.

Other creative uses of narrative and the practice of *lectio divina* shared that day included story-telling within the theological reflection process, the composition of additional chapters to one’s autobiography, and the juxtaposition of a novice’s own life-story alongside a person from Scripture, and/or a founding member of the congregation. As we listened attentively to these varied ways in which narrative and *lectio divina* were already being used within the formative process we were more convinced than ever that the *holy reading* of our lives is an indispensable practice in the process of discernment.

LECTIO DIVINA: EVER ANCIENT, EVER NEW

Lectio divina, holy reading, is experiencing a resurgence of popularity in our day. “Google” the term *lectio divina*, and you will be amazed at the number of websites at your disposal. *Lectio divina* is a truly ancient practice. Listening to the narratives of God’s in-breaking into human history has spanned thousands of years. Jesus himself was formed by *lectio* (Luke 2: 45-47) and his encounter with the disciples as they journeyed on the road to Emmaus was a patient, loving *lectio* of the events which had led to his death and resurrection (Luke 24:13-35). The early Christian community continued the practice of *lectio* incorporating the listening of the Word into its celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Later still, Benedict in his *Rule* included the work of *lectio* (reading) as an integral part of a monastic’s day along with working with one’s hands (manual labor) and the work of God (liturgy).

Within the Christian tradition the texts most commonly used in *lectio divina* were the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Later, the writings of the desert mothers and fathers, as well as the manuscripts of saints, mystics, and founders and foundresses of religious congregations were also read. Notwithstanding the variety of texts employed throughout the centuries, the essence of *lectio divina* has been, and is today, a personal encounter with God. As Nathan Mitchell

observes, it is through *lectio divina* that we truly enter, by means of the word into contact with the Word of God. It is through *lectio* that we grow more desirous of conforming our lives to that of Jesus (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:6, Philippians 2:5) thus continuing the Incarnation in our own day.

Just as for centuries the process of *lectio divina* was practiced using Scripture and the writings of holy women and men, so too the process of *lectio divina* may be applied to the narratives of our own lives. Like Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), we too can practice a patient, loving *lectio* of our lives as we listen intently for God's in-breaking into our own daily deaths and resurrections.

The format or process of *lectio divina* has varied throughout the ages. Though Benedict urged his followers to practice *lectio divina* he was not very specific about how it was to be done. Today, the most common practice of *lectio divina* distinguishes five moments of prayer: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, *contemplatio*, and *operatio*. These moments are not distinct but rather fade one into the next as an individual gently moves from an "active" to a more "receptive" manner of praying.

As we explore *lectio divina*, the work of Luke Dysinger, OSB, will introduce each section. Selecting an experience or passage from your own journal entries may prove helpful as we explore the ever ancient, yet ever new practice of *lectio divina*.

Become comfortable and allow some moments to pass as you move towards an inner atmosphere of quiet. Some individuals focus on their breathing; others have a "prayer word" or mantra they recite in order to become interiorly stilled. For some the practice known as "centering prayer" provides a way of entering into lectio divina, holy reading of the sacred texts of one's own life. Use whatever best allows you to rest for a few moments in quiet and stillness.

LECTIO: DEEP LISTENING

Although the Latin word *lectio* translates quite literally as "reading," its meaning is much more profound. Many are surprised to discover that until approximately the twelfth century, reading was a communal and public act. With books a precious commodity and literacy often a rare occurrence, *lectio* was more a matter of listening to, rather than a reading of, the

Word of God. Benedict in his *Rule* suggests that the time of *lectio* is to be spent cultivating the ability to listen deeply "with the ear of our hearts."

Now, turn to the text you have chosen and read it slowly, gently. Let each sentence echo within you. While reading listen for the "still, small voice" of a word or phrase that calls out for your attention. Do not expect lightning or ecstasies. In lectio divina God desires that we listen, that we seek God in the quiet of our heart. Therefore, God does not reach out and grab our attention but rather gently invites us ever more deeply into God's presence.

To what precisely are we to listen during our *lectio*? Following Elijah we listen attentively for God's presence as it manifests itself through the text, often in quiet and subtle ways (1 Kings 19:12). At times our *lectio*, deep listening, will be experienced as a moment of consolation and joy. At other times we may experience *lectio* as a strenuous even perilous task, as aspects of ourselves in need of further conversion come to our awareness. Remaining open to the text during these difficult moments is, as Mitchell notes, hard work because it demands that we wrestle with God's word in the raw, that we meet the word *alive* – sharp as a two-edged sword and not becalmed by commentary.

MEDITATIO: PRAYERFUL PONDERING

Just as the seasons fade one into the next, so does *lectio* give way, in God's time, to *meditatio*. While listening attentively for God's presence during *lectio* we allow ourselves to be drawn to a word or phrase in the text that "shimmers" or beckons us, as the Benedictines say. As the word or phrase echoes within and makes its home in us (John 14:23) we slowly surrender to encountering God in a manner reminiscent of the Israelites on Mount Horeb: "You heard the sounds of words but saw no form; there was only a voice" (Deuteronomy 4:12).

Next, focus your attention on the word or phrase that has "shimmered" for you while listening deeply to the text. Repeat the word or phrase slowly to yourself allowing it to interact with your inner world of memories, emotions, and thoughts. Do not worry if distractions arise, they are simply part-and-parcel of what is stir-

ring within and they have a right to exist! Acknowledge them and gently place them to the side. If the same distraction appears with regularity, you may wish to make it the focus of your prayer and discern its meanings. For now simply return to the word or phrase that has “shimmered” and prayerfully ponder what it may be revealing to you. Allow this inner pondering to invite you into dialogue with God.

Meditatio is not an intellectual exercise. Rather, through prayerful pondering of the text before us we seek an encounter with God. We prayerfully linger with the word or phrase that has shimmered as it interacts and mingles with all that is within us: emotions, thoughts, memories, and desires. As the word or phrase descends from mind to heart, we are offered the opportunity to be formed and reformed, learning progressively to see ourselves and the world with the mind and heart of Christ (Philippians 2:5).

Lectio divina, and in particular its second moment of *meditatio*, invites us to ponder prayerfully the very “stuff” of our lives. In doing so we may discover that we are resisting the emotions and thoughts that have entered our awareness. Resistance is a natural component of all growth and development and it often disguises itself as fear. In *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* Kathleen Norris writes, “Fear is not a bad place to start a spiritual journey. If you know what makes you afraid you can see more clearly that the way out is through the fear.” In fact, our resistance may be the first indication that what has shimmered during *meditatio* is precisely where we are being called to conversion! In befriending our resistance we may actually discover where God is longing to speak to us and bring us new life.

ORATIO: SPEAKING TO GOD — CONTEMPLATIO: GOD SPEAKS TO YOU

Having encountered God through both deep listening (*lectio*) and prayerful pondering (*meditatio*) we are invited in *oratio* to enter into dialogue with God — voice calling to Voice as it were, and then to *contemplatio* where God desires to speak to us.

Speak to God. Whether through praise, thanksgiving, petition, or intercession converse with God as you would with one you know loves and accepts you. Share with God what you have discovered during your time of lectio and med-

itatio. Give over to God the longings, desires, fears, and questions which may have surfaced as you listened deeply and pondered prayerfully your own life’s story.

In God’s own time you may be invited to cease from speaking and rest in God’s presence, allowing mind and heart to lie fallow and receptive, listening for a Voice too deep for words. Remain present to God with few, if any words, until you feel moved again to return to the text before you.

Oratio and *contemplatio* are characterized, as any intimate exchange is, by the ebb and flow of both speech and silence. Following a prayerful pondering of our life’s story we now speak to God. But as is true of any dialogue or colloquy of depth, we also wish to hear the response of the other, to listen closely to what the other may disclose in return, thus increasing the intimacy shared. And so in *contemplatio* we are invited to cease from speaking and rest in God’s presence.

After some moments of stillness and silence we may find ourselves returning to the narrative before us, either to savor again the word or phrase which has “shimmered” or being drawn to another. We refrain from anxiously trying to assess the quality of this time spent with God, knowing that *lectio divina* has no goal other than being in the presence of God.

The crux of *oratio* and *contemplatio* is dialogue, a dialogue which unfolds on many and varied levels. To speak, to dialogue (even with ourselves) almost always involves risk. As Ecclesiasticus reminds us, “the fruit of the tree shows the care it has had, so too does one’s speech disclose the bent of one’s mind” (27:6). To risk the disclosure of the “bent of one’s mind” is an important avenue of growth. Verbalizing what we have discovered through a deep listening and prayerful pondering of our stories allows us to clarify and sharpen what we have heard within. Then, placing our longings, desires, fears, and questions before God, we wait in silence (Lamentations 3:26). Our waiting, characterized by a sense of ardent expectancy rather than passive resignation, is an important indication of our ability to be open and receptive to God’s presence.

OPERATIO: PROPHETIC WITNESSING

Operatio, the last moment of *lectio divina* calls us,

as it did Jesus, to witness to what we have heard in the dark (Matthew 10:27). Formed from an early age by *lectio*, Jesus was accustomed to listening deeply for God's presence and activity in his own life and in the life of his people. We may wonder what were the words or phrases that "shimmered" and beckoned Jesus in *meditation*. Whatever they were, Jesus was consumed by them and often found ways to create moments of prayer even in the midst of the most intense activity, conversing with God (*oratio*) and being absorbed in God's presence (*contemplatio*).

When time comes to bring the lectio divina of your life-story to a close, reflect for a few moments on the following. How has my time of lectio divina allowed me to recognize that my most authentic identity is rooted in God? In what ways might this deeper understanding influence my activities and involvements in community and ministry this day?

Two "fruits" have long been associated with the practice of *lectio divina*: first, a deepening sense of one's authentic identity as flowing from an intimate relationship with God; secondly, an understanding of mission as the enactment of God's vision for all of creation in the here-and-now. These two fruits were present and active in the life of Jesus. Jesus' sense of self, as called by God, unfolded gradually as he grew in wisdom, age and grace (Luke 2:52), reaching a particular intensity at his baptism by John in the Jordan (Luke 3:22). Similarly, Jesus' understanding of his mission was formed and reformed through his profound experiences of God in prayer. Progressively, Jesus came to identify so strongly with God's vision (John 14:7-14) that, even at the cost of his life, he proclaimed it boldly.

The human sciences, particularly psychology, have helped us to appreciate the importance of possessing a clear sense of identity. We now understand that what we choose to do with our lives flows ultimately from an understanding of who we are. Jesus grew to understand his identity as being one with God. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). We too are called to find our authentic identity in and through our relationship with God, thus allowing it to give shape and meaning to our choices, our prophetic witness (*operatio*) in the world today.

Operatio, positioned as it is as the final moment of *lectio divina*, attests to the essential unity between con-

templation and action in the Christian life. We are called, as Jesus was, to continue to witness to the primacy of God and the power of the Gospel. Our capacity to do so will be strongly influenced by our ability to keep a creative rhythm between contemplation and action in our lives. *Lectio divina* enables us to witness in a more prophetic manner to the presence and action of God in our world because we have found God so present and active within our own experiences.

As our exploration of the practice of *lectio divina* within the formative process drew to a close the group reaffirmed its power and usefulness. Learning to reverence our own sacred scriptures holds for each one of us opportunities for growth and discovery. As we journey with women and men in initial formation or formation of any kind, let us offer to them multiple ways of growing in wisdom, age and grace as they discern a call to religious life or to their role in God's project. Let us invite them to "listen with the ear of their heart" to what shimmers and beckons within their own life-stories, so that they, like Jesus, may prophetically witness to God's presence in our world today.

RECOMMENDED READING

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Malone, N. M. OSU, *Walking a Literary Labyrinth: A Spirituality of Reading*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003.

Mitchell, N., "Holy Reading," in *Assembly: Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy* 26, no. 4 (July 2000): p. 25, 32.

Norris, K. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993.



Sister Mary Pat Garvin, R.S.M., Ph.D. teaches psychology for Seton Hall University and works nationally and internationally with religious congregations in the areas of initial and on-going formation.

Common Grace

Margaret Cessna, H.M.



She was the most common of common women. She was an Irish washerwoman with the soul of an angel. Dead 39 years, I did not know how much I still missed her until last week when she was so alive and warm in my dream.

"I have a message for you," she said.

"What is it, Grandma?" I asked.

"I will tell you on Tuesday," she replied.

Well, Tuesday came and went and no message that I could see. Or hear. Except that I could not stop thinking about her. Maybe that was the message. Take some time to remember and maybe to learn.

Grandma never wanted to go back to Ireland. Life was harsh for her there. Taken out of school after the second grade, she went to work at a rich neighbor's farmhouse to help her family. Her father was an army pensioner, her mother a domestic for a wealthy English family living in County Kilkenny with more power and influence than any of the poor Irish families who were their neighbors.

At eighteen she left home with her younger sister and older brother to find work in a small town in England.

It was there that she was employed at the local college laundry. A handsome young gentleman, a meat cutter, was smitten with her.

They married and had three children. In 1920, age thirty-five, she sailed for New York with her husband and children. She never looked back. Never.

She was the most common of common women. Thank God.

Having experienced harshness in her youth, she was determined to leave it behind when she set sail. She yearned only to be close to her family. As the family grew, we became her new world. We were her riches, her fortune. And we worshipped at her knee. She taught us the value of being loving and kind and generous. Not much else mattered.

Her first granddaughter, I share her name. After my grandfather died, she moved in with us and she was my roommate for four years. And today, 39 years since she died, I miss her presence in my life. But then, there is that dream. She is with me still. I have no idea what that means. I cannot understand it. But I sense it. I believe it.

So I am spending time relishing memories of my grandmother and of her most generous heart. She made all of us feel that we were God's greatest creation.

And a gift to her.

How beautiful to be common. How grace-filled and noble it can be. Common ripples through our lives and makes the world go around. Common builds bridges and tills the land. Common is our next door neighbor who helps in a pinch. A kind cashier when grief over-

whelms us. The cop who patrols our neighborhood. The teacher who believes in us. Common is a mother who weeps when her child is treated unfairly. A dad who plasters and paints his kid's first home. Common is life for most of us. Common is what teaches us what it means to be human. And, perhaps, a little bit divine.

What a pleasure it is to set aside time to give thanks for the saints among us – past and present. It gives me joy and fills me with gratitude. My grandma, all these years later, is somehow with me. I still cannot understand it. So I rely instead on memories of a warm hug, eyes that twinkle, a great Sunday dinner. A dollar slipped into my pocket. The memory of being loved beyond measure. And, for now, that is enough for me.



Sister Margaret Cessna, H.M., a sister of the Humility of Mary, is a writer from Cleveland, Ohio.

MAYBE YOU SHOULD NOT MARK CORRECTIONS IN RED

Most teachers mark papers with red. Some recent research with students in Germany and the United States may signal at least a caution light on the use of red. In research reported in the February 2007 *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* Andrew Elliot, Ph.D., and his associates show that students who saw red markers on a page, as distinct from those who saw green or black, performed more poorly on a testing packet of anagrams. Elliot believes that seeing red on a page induced students to avoid failure, which increased anxiety and distractions. One possible explanation, he believes, is that students have associated red with failure from teachers marking failures in red. He thinks that teachers would be wise to use varying colors to mark papers.

- Reported by A. Cynkar in *Monitor on Psychology* May, 2007, p. 11.

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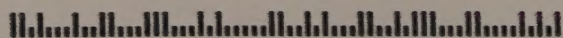
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